Arc Reaction

by Soulfulbard

Summary

His genius and hubris nearly got his faithful assistant Pyrrha killed. Now Jaune Arc will have to clean up his act in order to save her and together with her save the world. Iron Man Fusion.

Notes

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Powerful rock music poured out of the pair of mini-speakers wirelessly linked to Jaune Arc's Arc Industries Scroll as the humvee bounced along the rough road outside Vacuo. He was banging his head to the music, hammering it up for the Atlansian soldiers riding in the compartment with him.

Right beside him, his secret—personal assistant reason he wasn't dead, broke and dead broke, Pyrrha Nikos, was working on her own Scroll—actual work in this case; taking care of their travel arrangements home once the demonstration of the newest Arc Industries weapon system was over. She caught some of Jaune's act out of the corner of her eye and smiled fondly. He was such a big kid.

“Sir, can I ask a question?” one of the Atlansian soldiers raised his hand.

Jaune stopped his headbanging and nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah, sure, go for it. Always happy to do anything for the troops!”

The soldier smirked a little. “Is it true you went zero for twelve with last year's Weapons Magazine centerfolds?”

Some of the steam clearly leaking out of his bravado, Jaune looked away out the window with a bitter expression. “Thirteen.”

“Excuse me?” asked the soldier, who clearly knew the story and was having fun being able to take one of Remnant's richest, most famous celebrities down a peg by way of his most glaring weakness: his utter and well-publicized ineptitude with the fairer sex.

Jaune turned to face him with what Pyrrha liked to call his grumpy face. He thought it looked intimidating, but it just looked adorable. “It was zero for thirteen. March was twins, okay?” When the soldiers all laughed, Jaune snapped a little bit. “Oh come on! I revolutionized the Hunting industry! Instead of having people running around out here going hand-to-claw with the Grimm, they can wipe out hundreds of high-level Grimm with the push of a button, doesn't that get me some resp—”

It was about that time that the lead truck in their convoy exploded.

The two civilians ducked and covered while the soldiers' training kicked in.

“That's not Grimm,” said one of them whose statement was confirmed by the sound of automatic weapons and the patter of fire against the side of the humvee.

“Contact left!” Someone shouted. Before the humvee was done stopping, four of the five soldiers with them leapt out. “Stay with them!” one of them ordered the fifth. He only got a few steps away before a booming shot blew a hole in his chest and out his back, spraying blood across the side of the vehicle.

Jaune watched the man collapse in horror. That had been a Dust round. Someone out there was using Hunter-level equipment. The soldier's armor hadn't stood a chance. More booms followed and more Atlansian soldiers went down.
The soldier left with them, a woman Jaune had tried to flirt with the moment they got in, eyed the two and then her struggling comrades. “Stay here.” She said, moving toward the door.

“D-don’t go.” Jaune said, knowing there was nothing she could do. Beside him, Pyrrha echoed his sentiment. There was no use. With one last, desperate glance toward the pair, the solider made her choice and pushed her way out of the door in an effort to save some of her brothers and sisters in arms. She only made it a few steps before a Dust shot broke her helmet in half.

Unable to tear his eyes off the gristy sight, Jaune suddenly felt a tug on his arm. Pyrrha. “We have to get out of here,” she informed him as more shots hit the side of the humvee. Some of them were Dust rounds and made the whole thing shake.

“I—I agree.” All Jaune could do was allow her to pull him out the opposite side of the humvee, away from where all the soldiers had gone. They kept low, Pyrrha leading them away from the stalled and under fire convoy and toward some rocks jutting up from the ground on the side of the road.

After what felt like hours of dodging fire and stepping over downed Atlasians, the pair made it to their destination and flattened their backs against the tallest rock. While Jaune bravely hyperventilated and tried not to cry, Pyrrha pulled out her Scroll and tried to see if she could contact General Ironwood, who had been at the demonstration they’d just left.

There was a whizzing sound and a thump. When Pyrrha looked up, she saw a shell with the Arc Industries logo and the Schnee Dust Company emblem stamped on them. She gasped, bringing Jaune's attention to it.

“I—what?” Jaune actually leaned toward it and something inside the shell finally touched off. Too late, Jaune realized what was happening, but by then, the surprisingly solid weight of Pyrrha slammed into him, pushing him away just as it exploded.

Everything went white for an instant, and the gunfire and explosions were replaced with a high-pitched ringing noise. When Jaune's vision and other senses returned, the world was blurry and off-kilter. Pain blossomed in his head, suggesting he had a concussion. Blearily, he looked down to investigate the odd weight in his arms and across his lap and found flame-red hair and the dark tan blazer Pyrrha wore.

He blinked stupidly at this for a moment before he noticed he felt something else. Where his hands had closed around Pyrrha's torso, something warm and wet was starting to seep out through her blazer.

Blood.

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One Day Ago...

“Jaune Arc,” a voice boomed over the room's sound system as a respectful audience of military and industrial movers and shakers watched a huge screen up front showing images of various magazine covers and other media featuring Jaune Arc, “Visionary wunderkin. Born in the outer villages of Vale, young Arc was the youngest man in a line of great Hunters. But Arc's fate wasn't one of a Hunter. Despite bearing the Ar family blade, Corcea Mors, Arc was rejected from his attempts to join combat schools in Haven an Beacon.

“Undaunted, Arc turned his focus to the sciences, discovering hidden genius when it came to the
application of Dust. Within three years, he'd revolutionized not only the weapons industry, but changed the face of Hunting forever. With Arc Industries weaponry, vast swathes of formerly abandoned territory has been reclaimed and permanently defended with almost no Hunter or Huntress casualties.

“Remnant will never be the same thanks to the ingenuity and dedication of this great young man. And that's why for the fourth year in a row, the Remnant Society for Progress is bestowing the prestigious Innovator of the Year award to Jaune Arc!”

A spotlight panned across the tables to settle on the one reserved for the guest of honor. Where it was set for four, there were only two people present: a younger woman in her early twenties with chin-length black hair wearing a red and black dress with, inexplicably, a hood sewn into it, and a woman in her late twenties with dark tresses down to her shoulders and blazing orange eyes.

The younger waved nervously while the older rolled her eyes and gestured for both of them to get up and make their way to the stage. The younger woman took the mic and gave the crowd a nervous grin, picking up the spire-shaped glass award statue up from its place next to the podium.

“Um... so I was supposed to present this to Jaune, but he's... he's...”

“Thank you Ruby.” The older woman grabbed the mic from the girl and gave the crowd a charismatic smile. “Hello, my name is Cinder Fall, you may know me as Mr. Arc's long-time business partner. I will be accepting the award on his behalf because Jaune has been unfortunately delayed by an urgent business matter.”

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Another seven!” Jaune announced to the excited craps table as the dealer racked more chips over to his side of the board. “I am hot tonight. Up fifty thousand, let it ride!” He made eyes at a woman standing next to him, “Ladies love a winner and this guy is...”

The woman rolled her eyes and walked off.

“Oh come on! Didn't even get to finish my line.” Jaune moaned before turning back to the table and picking up the dice. “Anyone want to blow on my dice? Y'know, for luck?” He waggled his brows at a waitress who apparently decided the potential tips weren't worth it and sidled away. While Jaune glared at her, he didn't notice Pyrrha raising a finger and opening her mouth to say something. Oblivious, he tossed the dice.

“Eleven! Winner!” the dealer declared.

“Yes!” crowed Jaune, “Unlucky in love, but the devil's luck with the dice, oh yeah!”

Pyrrha smiled a little at his behavior and shook her head. Before she could try and get his attention again, a familiar face stomped up and tapped Jaune on the shoulder. “Jaune!” said Ruby Rose, annoyance in every letter of his name.

“Huh? Oh, hey Ruby! Ruby Rose, everyone! Come to watch me clean out the house at craps?”

“You told me that if I was the one presenting it, you'd come and accept it.” Ruby said, glaring with silver eyes.

Jaune missed the hint entirely. “And I totally will, Ruby. When is the presentation, by the way?” He grunted as Ruby shoved the statue into his hand. “Wha—oh, Ruby... I missed it? How did I miss it?”
Reddening a little, Pyrrha raised a finger. "That was probably my fault, Ruby. I warned him a few times it was time to leave the craps table, but then he started winning and he was so excited I didn't have the heart..." she trailed off.

Ruby gave her a little smile, but then glared at Jaune again. "Do not forget tomorrow."

"I would never forget tomorrow."

Not trusting him half as far as she could throw him, Ruby turned to Pyrrha. "Don't let him forget tomorrow."

"I will not allow him to forget tomorrow." the redhead promised.

For his part, Jaune gave Pyrrha a shame-faced smile and held up the statue. "Cool, another one of these." Then his eyes caught sight of something even more interesting across the way. "Hey, is that the reporter that did that spread on me a few months ago?"

"You mean the one saying Arc Industries is making profit off the worldwide threat of the Grimm? The one that accused you of being worse than the head of the Schnee Company?"

Jaune purred and started toward said reporter. "Yeah, that's her. She's cute."

Unable to help herself, Pyrrha face-palmed and followed after her employer. Someone had to be there to pick up the pieces of his ego once it was shattered yet again.

The next morning, Jaune woke up to an empty bed as usual.

He really had no idea what it was about him that repelled women. He was rich, reasonably handsome, and—oh yeah—he was an international hero for his inventions. Plus Pyrrha told him he was smart and funny. Speaking of Pyrrha, he also came with the world's best assistant-slash-bodyguard. What more could a woman want? Actually, rephrase that, why didn't any woman seem to want that?

Groaning, he got out of bed, alerting the motion sensors of his state-of-the-art smart house that he was awake. The lights came up to a comfortable level and the curtains slid open. Holographic readouts began to display on the glass.

"Good morning sir." The house's voice was prim, proper and feminine.

"Good morning, Glynda." He said, stumbling out of bed.

"The current outdoor temperature is seventy-one degrees with twenty-percent humidity and light winds up to three miles per hour from the northeast. Arc Industries monitoring satellites indicate that the chances of a Grimm attack in the area is twelve percent."

Jaune went about his morning routine in the bathroom while the Glynda program continued apprising him of the weather, current events and listed off messages from his personal emails, texts and voice mail. Nothing was pressing.

"Miss Nikos is in the main room." Glynda concluded.

That wasn't unusual. As his assistant and bodyguard, she had a key and often stayed in one of the guest rooms. Actually, now that Jaune thought of it, he didn't remember a time in the past month or
two where Pyrrha had slept at her own home. He made a note to ask if there was a problem with her place. He'd be a pretty awful boss if he ignored a problem like that strike his closest companion.

After breakfast.

“Play voice mail” He ordered the house as he made his way out to the main room, which was an open floor combination of living room, dining room and kitchen.

“First message sent at ten thirty-one pm last night: 'Hi, it's Ruby. Just leaving a message to make sure you don't forget. It's a sixteen hours flight, so you have to be out of your place at like... eight? I don't know. Anyway, bye!''

Pyrrha was sitting at the table, scroll in one hand, half-eaten plate of toast and eggs set before her. Without even looking up, she reached across the table to remove a tea towel from another plate, this one not half eaten, with the same contents. Then she pointed to the coffeemaker, which was sporting a carafe of fresh brew.

“Oh Pyrrha, you're beautiful,” sighed Jaune, grabbing the entire coffee carafe and a mug to bring over to the table and completely missing Pyrrha's expression at the complement.

“Second message sent at two oh-three am: 'Hey, it's Ruby again. Just in case you missed the other message, don't forget, you need to be on your way at eight. Only doing this because you've said you missed messages before. Bye.'”

“You only have about half an hour to eat before we need to get to the airport.” Pyrrha warned him, looking apologetic.

“It's not like the plane's gonna take off without me.” Jaune shrugged before taking a bite of egg. Through the mouthful, he said, “By the way, which airship are we taking? Is it the one with the retractable stripper poles? It's a sixteen hour flight, you know, I've got to have my entertainment.”

For once, Pyrrha was glad for his complete obliviousness as a more observant person might have noticed her shifty eyes. “I'm sorry, but that one's down for maintenance. We're taking the Bullhead.”

“Aw man, come on. It's been down every time we've had a long trip. Who is running that thing so ragged all the time? It's not me. Hmm. Is it Cinder? It's Cinder isn't it?”

“I'll... look into it,” Pyrrha said noncommittally. Even though the distraction the airship in question usually kept Jaune's mind off his airsickness, she thought it was best of Jaune not to try and make up for his lack of luck in love with paying women to take off their clothes. And it was her job to take care of him after all: business, body and mind.

“Third message sent at six fifteen am: 'You hours, Jaune. Pleasepleaseplease don't make this a thing where you're late and General Ironwood gets made but you're a civilian so he takes it out on me, please?'”

Jaune pouted and munched on his toast. “So Vacuo huh? They've got some hot clubs over there. Anything new and happening open up since we were there last?”

“We are really only scheduled to be there long enough for the demonstration. You have a board meeting on Thursday to get back and prepare for,” warned Pyrrha. Another pout from her boss softened her expression, “Alright, maybe I can talk to Cinder on our way over and convince her to take the meeting.”
When Jaune started to smile, she held up a finger, silencing him. “But. You have to finish eating and get ready so you'll actually be on time for Ruby for once. She's your friend; you should at least try to make her life easier.”

“Oh, alright.” Jaune sighed.


“Speaking of...” Pyrrha said with a small smile.

Jaune smirked. “Answer on the omni-mics.” The house made a tone, telling him that the call had been picked up. “Hey Rubes.”

“Jaune, please tell me you're getting dressed right now?”

Glancing down at his breakfast and then at Pyrrha's stern look, Jaune waffled a bit before saying, “I am getting dressed right now?”

There was a long pause before Ruby asked suspiciously, “Why did you phrase that as a question? Are you still eating breakfast?” She gasped in irritation, “Are you still in bed?!”

While Jaune sputtered, Pyrrha came to his rescue. “I promise he's not in bed and he will be at the Bullhead on time for a change.”

“Thank you Pyrrha.” Ruby said sweetly. “See you in a little while then!”

“See you Ruby!” Pyrrha replied as the connection was ended.

Jaune cast a mournful look at his remaining egg. “I'm... not going to get to finish breakfast, am I?”

“Nope.”

“Aw, man...”

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For Pyrrha Nikos, whose professional worth was tied to how far out of danger Jaune Arc was kept, his driving should have put her teeth on edge. He was as reckless and rushed doing that as he was with everything, only in this case, it was behind the wheel of a half-ton vehicle tearing down the road from his private compound to the Vale airship landing pads.

For Pyrrha Nikos, four-time tournament champion who had expected to spend her life fighting the monsters of Grimm, it was exhilarating. The speed, the danger, the razor thin margins where reflexes made all the difference... she only wished she was the one in the driver's seat.

But the same Hunter's spirit that filled her soul was in Jaune's blood too, only driving was he only outlet for it while she at least occasionally got the chance to dropkick one of his crazed fans or White Fang terrorist out to kill him through a wall or two. So despite her own passion and better judgment, she let him drive everywhere.

Besides, he drove faster than even she would dare and they were on a deadline for Ruby.

Not ten minutes after they left home, Jaune's car came to a drifting stop, tires squealing, right at the rear loading ramp of the Bullhead. “How're we doing on time, Pyr?” Jaune asked, adjusting his sunglasses.
“Seven fifty-eight. We’re actually on time. I’m so proud of you,” Pyrrha teased before gathering her things.

“You still aren’t on the airship!” Ruby was standing at the top of the ramp, shouting across the tarmac at them.

Jaune climbed out of the car and pulled his duffel bag out of the back seat. “We still have two minutes!”

“A minute twenty!” Ruby called back.

With that as motivation, Jaune and Pyrrha hurried aboard.

Arc Industries' company Bullhead had a custom interior built for comfort with an eye toward minimizing the owner's airsickness. The seating was mostly plush couches and wood fixtures, all secure against turbulence. There was also a full-stocked bar just for long flights like the one they were taking. Its express purpose was for Jaune to 'self medicate' himself unconscious.

Of course, not everyone agreed on his plan of action.

“You can't meet with General Ironwood drunk. Or hung over.” Jaune and Pyrrha sat across from Ruby in a booth along the plane's midsection as a flight attendant offered the ladies hot towels and Jaune the five martinis he'd asked for.

“She is right, Jaune,” Pyrrha added, watching her employer with concern, “This is not the healthy way to counter your affliction. Please just take the pills.”

Jaune scowled and whined, “But I need them! And the pills don't work totally.” He knew Pyrrha would not be moved, not unless she was outnumbered and diverted, so he turned his attention on Ruby. “Besides, it's not like the drinks would be all for me—come on Rubes, I know you turned old enough to drink on your last birthday. Why not drink with me? We can all drink together, it'll be like a little party!”

At the mention of drinking, Ruby had a brief flashback to her last birthday, or rather, waking up the morning after her last birthday party in a strange hotel room with her sister Yang asleep in the bathtub, an unconscious but not dead Ursa sprawled on the floor and the Atlasian Military Police knocking on the door.

“Um... that might not be a good idea...” She said, nervously poking two of her fingers together.

“Come on, Rubes, live a little,” Jaune prodded. He gestured and one of the flight attendants brought over a clay bottle. “Maybe try a little hot sake?”

Ruby leaned forward in curiosity. “Well I almost wanted to try... But no—no, this is a bad idea, Jaune and I'm not doing it.”

Ruby slouched in the booth seat, one hand gripping the clay bottle, her cloak and hood rumpled, and the hot towel draped over her head.”So my sister,” she slurried, “You know my sister, right, Jauney? Yang? Yeah, you know my sister. She says...”

The first three times she'd told this story, Jaune had listened attentively. It was a pretty entertaining story about her sister getting into a brawl at a club. By now, on the fifth go around, he was just tuning her our, happily enjoying his buzz and the comfortable weight pressed against his right side.
Pyrrha, to his surprise, had turned out to be a lightweight with the booze. After just two screwdrivers (light on the vodka at her insistence), his assistant had drifted off, ending up curled up on the booth beside him, leaning heavily on his arm, her head nestled against his shoulder, both arms clutching his arm like a teddy ursa.

Maybe if he wasn't buzzed, he might have noticed that her breathing wasn't anywhere near deep enough for someone who was asleep and that she was merely enjoying her own buzz—not all of it off alcohol.

The badlands outside Vacuo were bright, the light-colored, bare stone and sand reflected the sun almost like snow and made Jaune happy he was wearing his sunglasses. The three silver-hulls Atlasian capital ships and attendant military hardware flanking the demonstration site didn't help.

Several ranks of Atlasian soldiers stood arrayed in front of him. At their head was General Ironwood, an imposing, dark-haired man with a strong jaw and a perpetual expression of superiority that always made Jaune feel smaller whenever he had to interact with him.

Beside Arc was Ruby in her capacity as Arc Industries' military liaison. The young woman was gamely trying to conceal her hangover, swaying unsteadily on her feet, using the unfolded form of her Huntress weapon, Crescent Rose to keep the sun out of her bloodshot eyes.

Pyrrha, as always, was beside him, Scroll in hand, looking prim and attentive, ready to take notes.

For his part, Jaune was on. Every ounce of his false bravado and actual charisma were engaged. Gone now was the awkward young man that his friends knew every day. Now he was talking about the two subjects he was most passionate about: his inventions and protecting the people of Remnant.

“A wise man once said that the best weapon is the one you never have to fire.”

As he spoke, he opened his own scroll and connected to the secure frequency the demonstration equipment was linked to and started tapping in commands. Behind him two aluminum trailers opened up on top and extended a pair of parabolic speaker arrays into the sky on hydraulics.

The Grimm Lure technology was probably one of his most controversial innovations. People rightly worried about the idea of devices designed to attract Grimm when the goal on everyone's mind concerning the beasts was how to drive them away.

Jaune's argument had always been that they would never be rid of the Grimm as long as some remained hibernating in the dark places of the world, waiting to arise and multiply (however Grimm reproduced) once humanity was once more off its guard. With the Grimm Lures, he could draw hordes of the creatures out of their hiding places and into range of his weapons systems—like he was right now.

There was a distant rumbling and on a forested mountain five miles away, the spaces between the trees started to visibly darken. Grimm were emerging from the eaves in their multitudes, attracted by the negative emotional wavelengths the Grimm Lures directed their way.

Beowolves, ursa, boarbatusks, and even a few deathstalkers began their long charge down the mountain, rushing headlong to destroy the suffering humanity they sensed in the distance.

“Unfortunately,” Jaune continued as the Atlasians started shifting uneasily. “We live in a world infested by Grimm: creatures who hunt us with a single-minded hatred, who cannot be reasoned or
negotiated with. Even though we like to say we live in a time of peace, the best I or anyone else can offer is a weapon you only have to fire once.”

A few more touches to his Scroll and a third trailer opened, revealing a sleek missile three times the size of a man. In place of traditional boosters, it had a lensed Dust channel, a technology Jaune had dubbed 'repulser' technology for its ability to channel force without conveying heat, throwing things around without doing other damage.

“Ladies and gentlemen; I present for your consideration: the Jericho.”

With a dramatic flair, he tapped the final icon on his Scroll, lighting off the repulser engine and sending his new weapon skyward.

The assembled personnel watched as the missile reached apogee and its body split open, launching dozens of smaller bomblets, each with their own miniature repulser that was dynamically guided as the missile's distributed sensors and computing acquired more Grimm targets and directed them for maximum impact.

A veritable rain of explosive firepower fell on the Grimm and the forest around them, Dust-powered explosions sending out shockwaves that rebounded off one another as they tore Grimm, trees and boulders alike apart until the entire mountainside became a meatgrinder.

A much smaller bow wave descended the mountain, gathering dust as it crested over Jaune and the soldiers, ruffling clothes and catching everyone in a brief, terrible wind that smelled of expended Dust and burning Grimm.

“So General, how many can I put you down for?”

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“That went well.” Pyrrha chirped, sending off a quick message back to company headquarters about the fifty Jerichos Atlas wanted to order. “Though next time maybe we should position the demonstration area farther away from the blast zone.”

Jaune rubbed the back of his head and chuckled as the followed their detail of soldiers over to the convoy that would take them back to Vacuo proper. The Atlasians were bugging out directly and not heading for the city and Ruby needed to hang back and meet with the General, leaving her two friends to their own devices for the evening.

“I wish I could say it was all for theatrical effect, but I honestly didn't expect the yield to be that high. We should send some surveyors up there to see if we accidentally hit a raw Dust deposit up there or something.”

Pyrrha nodded and began putting that into her Scroll. “That's a good idea, and if we do find some left, it will make the Schnee Company very happy.” She looked up at the devastated mountain side. “Plus, it isn't as if there are any Grimm up there anymore to antagonize the surveyors or the miners.” With that, she got Jaune moving again, back to the humvees, fully unaware of... quite a bit.

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On the steaming, dusty mountain side, the bodies of Grimm were disintegrating as their animating force abandoned their physical forms. Pyrrha was correct in surmising that the Jericho's awesome power had annihilated the Grimm on the mountain, but at the same time, the Dust-infused explosions had cracked a lava dome that dated to beck before the Great Wars and even the Grimm
themselves.

And from within that crack, a faint green light emanated.

Chapter End Notes

In case you're all wondering, this is a fusion of the MCU Iron Man and RWBY. It's not really going to purely follow either canon as I firmly believe a fusion story should be affected by all the changes from each.

In this case, I've added the twist that while Jaune is fused with Tony Stark (which was way more difficult than I thought, merging Tony's uncaring confidence with Jaune's false bravado), the Iron Man (called Hematite here) in it will be Pyrrha who also has the Pepper role. In addition, we've got Ruby as Rhodey, which was an obvious choice, and Cinder as Staine (at least at first). I can't promise you other characters will get a pure fusion treatment or that they'll all get included from either side. There's no Happy Hogan for example, and I have yet to come up with places for Sun or Neptune.

The plot is close to Iron Man right now, but it's going to expand into multiple (heh) arcs along the way including bringing in Iron Man's classic nemesis and the greatest (read: most hilarious) villain Jack Kirby has ever created.
3 Years Ago...

Pyrrha Nikos forced down the feeling of dread she was getting as she followed Cinder Fall through the too-clean, too-new halls of what she’d been told was Jaune Arc's home.

The sprawling compound was located several miles outside Vale, perched on an oceanside cliff, surrounded by its own walls and guarded by Arc Industries anti-Grimm defenses. It also make her feel unworthy of her old Mistral nickname of Spartan. The places was so sparcely lived in that if it wasn't for the noticeably well-used bar stocked with partially empty bottles she'd noticed as they passed through the living room, she wouldn't have believed anyone lived there at all.

But that wasn't what had her on edge. That honor belonged to Cinder Fall, Jaune's business partner and the person who handled the corporate affairs of Arc Industries. To put it succinctly, the woman was an obvious predator. As a former Huntress, Pyrrha knew because she was one too. She could see it in the keen, all-observing eyes, the lithe, smooth and deliberate gait, and the measured, serpentine way Cinder spoke.

That wasn't enough to raise any red flags; in the months since the widescale deployment of the Arc Industries Helios defense systems, every Huntsman and Huntress with any sense were at least looking into new fields: law enforcement, military service, mercenary work and the like. The writing on the wall: the Age of Hunters was coming to a close.

But Cinder Fall, as far as Pyrrha's research could turn up, had never been a Huntress or even trained as such. Plus, Pyrrha couldn't shake the feeling that even while walking behind the woman, listening to the distinct sound of her glass heels clicking on the tile, Cinder was hunting her.

And all the while, she was keeping up a continual chatter in an apathetic tone. “As you can see, you won't have much of a problem while he's at home or working. The living area is upstairs, well within the compound, while Jaune's laboratory is in the basement, secure beneath eight feet of reinforced concrete and a biometric lock.”

They were descending from the living room into an alcove of bare concrete and tile where stood a glass door flanked by floor-to-ceiling windows.

Pyrrha took in the expanse of computers and work tables just beyond the lab entrance. At the largest table she caught sight of a man of about her height, wearing slacks and a polo shirt. A glow slipped past his turned back, suggesting he was working with a hologram of some sort. A glass of brandy sat at his right elbow as he worked.

She frowned. “The glass fronting doesn't seem very secure. Should someone slip the perimeter, they could break right through this.”

Cinder stopped right next to the door where a control panel waited for her entry code and thumbprint. “Things are not always what they appear, Miss Nikos.” She rapped on one pane of glass with a fist adorned with heavy gold and silver rings. “This is not glass at all, but ice created by a member of one of our largest corporate allies, the Schnee Dust Company. Imbued with high quality crystalline freeze, it has been rated against high caliber Dust rounds. It is unlikely that even your much-vaunted Milo could penetrate.”

Tossing a smug smile in Pyrrha's direction, she tapped in her code and held her thumb to the
scanner until the locks on the door clicked.

Pyrrha was pondering just why the other woman was so antagonistic to her while Cinder pushed open the door, allowing the pumping rock music playing on the other side to escape into the alcove.

Not five steps into the lab and Cinder slammed her hand down onto a stereo system precariously perched on a table otherwise awash in printouts and cartons from various delivery places. The sound died—or rather most of it.

The high, off key singing of Jaune Arc continued on for a few moments more before he realized something was amiss. Looking disheveled and in need of a good night's sleep, Jaune turned to see that he had an audience.

“Cindie! Great to see you—why'd you turn off my tunes? A guy can't work without his tunes, you know? I thought you said you wanted me working.”

It wasn't hard to notice how Cinder flexed her fists at being called 'Cindie', but Pyrrha got the distinct impression Jaune didn't notice and had missed the gesture many, many time before.

“Please,” the dark-haired woman scoffed, “The last time I checked in on you, you were working on tweaking the ridiculous AI for your house.”

Jaune pouted and went to scoop up his brandy. “Once it's fully integrated and online, I can route it through my fabrication array and helper drones and my efficiency and build times will be well worth it, I promise...”

It was then and only then that he noticed that Cinder was not alone. He looked Pyrrha up and down, not even bothering to hide it. Instinctively, Pyrrha straightened her spine, but not out of an interest of making herself look more attractive, but to steel herself for having her illusions shattered.

Rumors abounded about Jaune Arc. Some were obvious lies, like the idea that he was entirely motivated by revenge for not getting into Beacon and was plotting the downfall of the Hunters. More plausible was the idea that the reason he had never been seen with or even rumored to have a romantic partner was because he was the worst kind of womanizer; a man who used his wealth and fame to pick up women, do whatever he wanted, and then left them with a little money to keep quiet about his wicked ways.

Pyrrha Nikos was not looking forward to being harassed by someone she'd been hoping to work with in mutual respect. It wasn't helping that he was staring at her longer than politeness would allow. She wondered what it was he was staring at: she was wearing a very conservative suit with a skirt well below the knees, cream blouse and bronze tie. Her hair was pulled back in a high ponytail with no adornment.

“I know her...” Jaune finally said, thoughtful. He looked to Cinder, “Cindie, where do I know her from?”

“Honestly, there are an infinite number of places and times where she might have had the opportunity to soundly reject you. I do not keep a running tally of your romantic failures.”

Jaune flinched, looking hurt, but then strode over to Pyrrha, offering his non-brandy hand. “Well in any case, hi I'm Jaune—Jaune Arc. It's short, sweet, rolls off the tongue. Ladies love it.”

That was the legendary line that was supposed to sweep women off their sweep, leaving them
vulnerable apparently weird sex, being performing the walk of shame and a check for their silence? Pyrrha wasn't really all that acquainted with lots of other women, but she would weep for her gender if that worked on more than a fraction of a percentage of their number. It was just... awkward; something a guy might say when he had no idea what he was doing.

It didn't do anything to make her respect him more, but it did put a lie to the rumor that Jaune Arc was secretly seducing dozens of women.

On impulse, she asked, “We do?”

Jaune blinked and stumbled both mentally and physically. “Y-you don't?”

Trying to hide her horror at the fact that she'd just said that to a perspective employer, she tried to make a save. “I mean... the Arc name is the object of deep respect for those in the Hunting community... and you've made it into a household name.”

There was more blinking as Jaune tried to figure out where he'd gone wrong. He tried to cover it with a drink from his glass.

“All right, enough of this.” Cinder came between them and pushed the two apart. “Jaune, this is Pyrrha Nikos, your new bodyguard. You asked me to take care of that staffing issue and I have, as always, provided. Now all you have to do is find an assistant—I pray you can do that on your own.”

Bleary eyes took Pyrrha in again as Jaune's brain seemed to reorient from a romantic evaluation to a professional one. “Can I at least hear her qualifications?”

When all Cinder did was glare at him, Pyrrha took it upon herself to fill him in. “Well, I was the four-time Champion of Mistral's tournaments, Two-time Vytal Festival Champion, a graduate of the one hundred and eighth class at Beacon... and I served five months as an adjunct Huntress at Menagerie.”

Jaune seemed to instantly sober, his amiable haplessness dissolving into nervous concern. “Cindie? Can I have a word?” Before the other woman could reply, he'd grabbed her wrist and dragged her over to the other side of the room.

“A Huntress?” he hissed, wild-eyed. “Are you off your gourd, woman? The whole reason I even need a bodyguard is because so many out of work hunters have made death threats against me. And you want me to hire like... the absolute best one of them?

“Sweet Dust, Cinder, did you hear that list of accomplishments, I probably ruined this woman's life! She was probably like going to be some awesome celebrity and then I launch Helios and 'whoosh', there goes her life, right down the toilet.”

He might have continued on that way, if not for Cinder grabbing his shoulder and squeezing until it hurt so much he yelped and shut up. “If you are quite done, allow me to explain in exactly what ways you are still somehow a complete idiot.

“One: she is not an out of work Huntress. In fact, she is being paid a ridiculous salary to keep you alive—a salary she will stop getting if you die.”

“And two?” Jaune asked, desperately hoping two was something that promised the redhead wasn't going to murder him before the night was through.

Cinder fixed him with her baleful orange eyes. “Two: as a Huntress, her Aura is unlocked,
meaning, among other things, that she has excellent hearing.”

For just a moment, it was as if Jaune had turned completely to stone. Then, moving slowly as if her vision might be keyed to motion and there was still a chance for him to flee for his life, he turned toward Pyrrha.

The former Huntress had gravitated to the holographic workspace and was idly examining the mock-up helper drone he'd been designing. She noticed him and gave a timid wave and smile, “Sorry. I really didn't mean to eavesdrop... you were just really loud.”

Seeing Jaune immobilized, Cinder clapped him on the shoulder she had no doubt bruised earlier. “I already put her paperwork through; she's hired. Good luck.” With that, she sauntered out of the room and presumably out of the compound thereafter.

“Uh...”

Seeing the man in considerable distress, Pyrrha approached him slowly, keeping her hands in sight so he didn't think she was suddenly going to come up with a weapon. “I can understand your misgivings, Mr. Arc,” she began in a soothing voice.

Finally unfrozen, Jaune gulped down his brandy in a single belt, coughing for several seconds thereafter. “You could call them that—pleasedon'tkillme.”

“I have no intention to to harm you, Mr. Arc: just the opposite. What I said before about the respect I have for the Arc name and what you have done with it was absolutely true. And while I loved training for and being a Huntress, I understand that what you are trying to do is ultimately what is best for all of Remnant.”

She stopped coming closer once she was just outside of arm's reach, locking her eyes with his. “I was at Menagerie when Helios was first deployed. I saw how many Grimm were destroyed and how many lives were saved. There was no way we who were stationed there could have managed the same with zero casualties among the civilians.

“And the fact that you chose to sent Helios to Menagerie... I read that you fought against council members who didn't want to deliver their latest and greatest weapon to a Faunus-majority city...” she offered him a small but genuine smile, “Much of your reasoning was the same I used when requesting reassignment to Menagerie when everyone expected me to become some sort of military celebrity back home in Mistral proper.”

Jaune blinked rapidly. “But you could have been...”

“I could have been something shallow that on the whole didn't make much of a difference. At best, I might have inspired a few more kids to aspire to become hunters and turn back some Grimm incursions, helping humanity merely survive.”

Her bright eyes shone with her inner idealism. “But the reason I resigned and applied to be your bodyguard, Mr. Jaune Arc, is because I believe that what you're doing is far more important—that you and your work can allow us to aspire to more than mere survival—that one day, we might take Remnant from the Grimm once and for all. Anything I can do to help that happen, I will be grateful to be able to do.”

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Now.
“You did not tell us that the target was the famous Jaune Arc,” an angry male voice was saying. “Now the cost will be exponential!” Pyrrha tried to move, but pain lanced through her chest, taking her breath and consciousness away.

3 Years Ago...

As unsettling as Cinder was, she'd told the truth about how simple a job guarding Jaune was. In three weeks, he'd only left the house twice for press events an spent the rest of his time in the house—mostly the lab.

Today, Jaune had received the voice acting samples necessary for his house's AI and was eagerly coding them into the finished program. Pyrrha meantime, was sitting as a disused workstation, leafing through a Weapons Magazine, keeping an eye on her scroll, which was linked into the compound's security system.

“Hey Pyrrha?”

She looked up. Aside from greetings and goodbyes, Jaune hadn't said much to her since her first day. After her heartfelt admission to him about how she felt about his work, he'd given her a smile, welcomed her to the company... then cranked his music and went back to work—and had been working almost every moment they'd spent together ever sense.

That left a lot of silence in the air, but it wasn't as if he was avoiding her, he was just busy with his work, which she could respect.

“Yes, Mr. Arc?”

“Jaune. I don't think anyone's ever called me 'Mr. Arc' unless they were a teacher and were upset with me. So please: Jaune.”

She nodded. “Yes, Jaune?”

“How big are your hands?”

That... was not what she'd expected him to ask. “Excuse me?”

“How big are your hands.” He wasn't even looking up, instead hunching over a workbench strewn with parts and tools. “Come on, bring 'em over. Lemme see.”

Bewildered, but intrigued, Pyrrha sat her magazine aside and came over to where he was working. Before him was a partially-constructed robot arm with a roller base. Jaune was peering into a small cavity with a pen light.

As soon as she got up next to him, he glanced up, eyes instantly going to her hands. “Oh perfect very um... petite.” Pyrrha got the sense he wasn't sure that was the right word and was worrying if he'd insulted her.

When she didn't balk, he nodded toward the open cavity in the robot. “I've got a chip plugged in there that's got to be swapped out. Too smooth for forceps. Can you just reach in there and pull it out?”

Pyrrha gauged the size of the hole and concluded it wouldn't be a problem. “Sure.”
She started to reach for it, but Jaune raised a hand. “Um, be careful, the power's still on so you
don't want to get a shock.”

“Would it be a bad shock.”

“Well I mean it wouldn't feel good.”

“But is it dangerous?” Now Pyrrha was giving the machine a suspicious look.

“No,” Jaune soothed, “No. Well you don't have any Dust on you, do you? Cause that might get set
—”

“No, I'm fine.” Pyrrha assured him, reaching toward the open space. “I'm fine,” she repeated, more
for herself than for him. Her fingers disappeared into the cavity, gradually feeling her way forward
on the cool metal until she made contact with a piece of notched plastic.

Very carefully, so as to not get a shock, she grasped it and tugged, feeling the click as it came loose
from its mooring.

With a triumphant little flourish, she withdrew the chip and placed it on the workbench in front of
Jaune. “There you go, sir.”

Jaune just sat there and looked at the chip for a long moment, lost in thought. Then he seemed to
shake himself out of it. “Oh. Uh, thank you, Pyrrha.” She nodded and started to move away, but
then, “Hey, I've got an idea.”

“Yes?” She turned back to him, trying to guess what he was going to ask next.

“You know, I was just thinking... Y-you pretty much sit here all day and look kind of bored... and
you were really handy just now...” He rubbed the back of his head, then searched around until he
found his brandy glass, taking a quick sip. “How would you like to be my assistant? You know, as
well as my bodyguard?”

Pyrrha started to answer, but he interrupted. “You'll get paid for both, I swear. This is not me being
cheap it's...” He sat the drink down and stared at the floor. “It's just that what you said the first
day... I'm not sure I'd ever find an assistant that gets it like you do. What I'm trying to do, I mean. It
meant a lot to hear someone say what you did, and I really can't think of anyone I'd rather work
with.”

At this, she gave him a broad smile. “You won't regret this, Jaune. I promise.”

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She didn't know how much time had passed since she heard the man shouting about Jaune, but the
next time she was aware of anything, it was Jaune's voice, ragged, desperate, but somehow firm. “-dies,
you get nothing. You understand me? I don't care what you do to me.”

That didn't sound encouraging. Pyrrha wanted to tell Jaune to forget her. That was what a
bodyguard was for: to make sure he survived, not the other way around.

She wanted to. But her chest still ached and her world once more faded to blackness.
The next thing she heard was Jaune's voice again. His voice was raspy. Tired. Defeated. The sound of it made her heart ache in ways far removed from the sting and throb that she was slowly becoming physically aware of.

“We missed your birthday, Pyr,” he muttered, his usual endearing ramble was tinged with a dull monotone. “I... I'm sorry. I'm just... so sorry. All of this is my fault. I picked Vacuo. I picked the time. I told Ruby we would be okay with just the soldiers. Dust, I could have told Ironwood to come to Vale and we could have had the demonstration on the plain outside of Mountain Glen. I chose to go there because they have the best clubs.”

He choked on a half-formed sob. “You almost died because I wanted to go hit on women and drink! Everything you've done for me: helping me work at home, teaching me to fight just in case, keeping me steady, getting me to cut back on drinking and I nearly get you killed. What the hell kind of person am I?”

Pyrrha fought. A pervading drowsiness tried to pull her back into oblivion, but she fought it. Jaune's distress drove her on because that was something Pyrrha Nikos could not abide by. With the same strength that had vanquished dozens in the arena and put an end to hundreds of Grimm, she battled her own body, forcing it into action.

“Jaune?” her voice came out as a croak.

Whatever self-repudiation that coming next died in Jaune's throat. “Pyr? You're awake?”

She was, coming full to in one final push against the grogginess that draped itself over her like a sodden blanket. Sensation fully returned and it was all manner of unpleasant. Something itched and ached and stung in her chest while she felt a steady pressure in her nose.

Sleep-clumsy fingers reached up to gauge the obstruction in her nose first. Breathing was one of the key pillars of combat, and last she knew, they had been surrounded by enemies. She found a tube—probably a feeder line judging by its thickness.

How long had she been out?

That had to go. Taking firm hold of it and steeling her constitution, she pulled, feeling the thing start to be drawn up her digestive tract. It was not a feeling she would wish on anyone. Eventually, the end came out of her nasal passage and got stuck on the tape that once secure it. Shuddering from the previous sensation, she yanked it free, then moved a hand toward whatever it was on her chest.

A hand closed over hers, not strong and callused like those inevitably described in romance novels, but slim and nimble—the hands of a tinkerer. “No nonononono.” Jaune babbled.

Pyrrha's eyes flickered open and immediately locked with his, raised brows conveying her confusion. But it wasn't Jaune that explained.

“He's right. You don't want to do that. The wire you were about to grasp is very literally your lifeline, Miss Niikos.”

Slowly and with too much effort, Pyrrha turned her head to find that she and Jaune weren't alone. A tall, lank dark-skinned man—a faunus with a curved set of ram's horns—sat at a table not far from
her. Now that she was getting a scope of the room, she realized it was not so much a room as a small cavern that had been further expanded by tools.

Taking a moment to look the man over, she recognized him. “The National Hunting Symposium two years ago,” she murmured. “Dr. Yinen, right?”

“Indeed, Miss Nikos. A pleasure to meet you again.”

Jaune chuckled. “I told you she had a better memory for faces than me.” He sheepishly rubbed the back of his head. “She’s also the one that read your book.”

Even though it disoriented her still-groggy head, Pyrrha nodded. “Back when I was stationed in Menagerie. I made sure my entire unit read it. Your thoughts on treating Grimm-inflicted wounds saved more than one life during my tenure.”

As an afterthought of her initial politeness found her craning her neck to look down at her chest. What she'd been wearing before was gone, replaced by a loose-fitting tanktop and homespun pants tied with a length of cord. A hole had been torn in the tanktop, kept from being indecent by the insulated wire that sprouted from a metal plate beneath the fabric and ran to a car battery propped up on a table next to where Jaune was sitting.

“What's going on?”

Dr. Yinen shifted in his seat. “You were struck with shrapnel, apparently protecting Mr. Arc.” He didn't pause for the guilty whimper that came from Jaune. “Luckily for you, I have experience with such wounds. Around my home village of Gulmira, we call them the 'walking dead', because the barbs move through your own muscular action for days, weeks or even months until they pierce your heart, causing you to bleed out slowly into your chest cavity.”

The blood drained from Pyrrha's face. “You mean... I'm going to die?”

The faunus doctor shook his head. “I said you were fortunate. Months ago, I devised a way to save the walking dead: an electromagnet implanted over the shrapnel pieces, preventing them from progressing toward the heart. You'll survive, Miss Nikos, as long as you have power... for however long our hosts allow it.”

His final words reminded Pyrrha, and after a quick thank you in his direction that she intended to repeat with more sincerity later, she turned to Jaune. “The bomb that hit us...”

“Packbuster. One of ours, I know,” he said woodenly. “The White Fang has my tech. They have my tech and they're using It on people... on you.” He let out a shuddering sigh and threw himself back in his chair. “I'm so sorry Pyrrha. I-I don't know if I ever really said this, but you're my best friend, you know that? A-and even with all my sisters, you're probably the closest thing I've got to family. And something that came out of my head did this to you.”

Before Pyrrha could offer up some soothing words, he took several calming breaths and added, “But I'm going to take care of this. I-I can handle it. Now that you're awake? I-I can handle it.”

Narrowing her eyes in suspicion, Pyrrha recalled the bits and pieces of what she'd heard while drifting in and out of consciousness. “Jaune? How are you 'handling it’?”

Behind her, Dr. Yinen let out an unhappy snort. “Yes, Mr. Arc, tell her about your deal with the devil.”

Looking down at her wide, shocked eyes, Jaune sighed. “You were dying, Pyr. Bleeding out in my
arms and that bastard... he was making demands. I told him if you didn't survive, he'd get nothing.” He looked away. “And I don't care if you hate me for it, or for whatever comes of it, but I'd do it again if I had to.”

Already knowing the answer, but needing to hear it from his own lips, she forced herself to ask. “What did you promise him?”

“He wants me to build him a Jericho.”

Pyrrha tried to sit up at that, but that was where her battered body drew the line, rewarding her with pain for her overzealous action. She winced, but ground out, “Jaune, you can't! Do you know what havok they could cause with that? How many people would die?”

“He told me he'd let us go after I did that.”

“No he won't,” she said flatly.

“No he won't,” Jaune repeated, still looking away. Then he shifted so his head lolled back, staring at the ceiling. “Pyrrha? I know you still keep up with your training even above sparring with me. If you didn't have that car battery, do you think you could fight?”

She pursed her lips and took personal stock. She felt far better than she expected for having a chest full of shrapnel. Her Aura would take care of everything else in a few days, however...

“I could fight, but I have no weapons, we're outnumbered, and we've seen they have Dust-users here. The best I would be able to achieve would be—pardon the pun—a Pyrrhic victory. We wouldn't survive, but we might be able to cripple their operation.”

Jaune hummed, deep in thought. He liked the idea of at least destroying all the Arc technologies they had. However, he'd much rather they live. “So. What you're saying is you need a weapon, probably armor...”

Confused at his odd mood, Pyrrha tried to engage him with a little humor. “And I'd need to be at least ten times as strong too, Jaune.”

“Well yeah, that goes without saying.” Jaune was in no way kidding. Pyrrha blinked as he ran his fingers through his hair, seeming to summon up his strength and nerves. “Yeah.... yeah... that'll work. He hurled himself out of his chair and strode over to a camera mounted to the ceiling, waving his hands erratically.

“Hey! Hey, Taurus! Pyrrha's awake! Let's deal!”

It took twenty minutes for their captors to respond. It was evident that they didn't want to appear to be at Jaune's beck and call.

A set of locked and chains were undone on the other side of the two heavy, steel doors that kept the three captives in their cavern and moments later, they were pushed open to admit their captor and his retinue.

Even Jaune, who paid little attention to politics, knew Adam Taurus, the charismatic leader who had turned the White Fang from a faunus rights organization to a brutal terrorist group with a river of blood on their hands. He was a tall man, well built with a boxer's body. Over the normal body suit worn by his cronies, he also wore a jacket embroidered with a wilted rose on the back. A
stylized Grimm mask covered the upper half of his face, leaving a chiseled jaw visible, while a red-bladed katana hung from his hip.

With him were a handful of typical White Fang goons, their masks and sleeveless white tunics mostly hiding the animal aspects of their bodies save for the occasional tail. But there was also a female cat faun dressed largely in black with a kusari-gama tucked into her belt.

The unusual weapon meant she was very likely to be a Dust-user, would make place her high in the ranks.

Pyrrha split her attention between the cat and Taurus, noting that the cat-woman was also keeping an eye on her.

For his part, Taurus only had eyes for Jaune... in a manner of speaking.

“So the great Jaune Arc finally deigns to speak with us lowly faunus,” he said dramatically, playing to his lackeys as he came to stand before Jaune, who had returned to his seat beside Pyrrha's bed. “I take it you've considered my generous offer.”

If he expected a cowed agreement, he seriously underestimate Jaune's uncanny ability to doggedly latch onto seemingly inconsequential details and slights. “Oh come on!” Jaune complained, seeming not to even notice as some of the goons trained guns on him at his outburst. “Lowly faunus? Really? You're really trying to make it sound like I hate faunus? You do realize that Menagerie was the first place the receive long-term protection from Helios, right? And my VP in charge of Marketing, Velvet Scarletina? A rabbit faunus. I had dinner with her Monday, actually.”

“Sunday.” Pyrrha corrected.

Taurus made a rude noise. “See that? He's too important to remember the last time he stooped so low as you dine with one of us.”

“Are you even listening?!” Jaune complained, then gestured at the doctor. “Yinsen is literally right here we've eaten together for the last eight days!”

“Of course he kept count. What's next? Some of your best friends are faunus?”

Jaune blinked. “No, my best friends are pretty much just Pyrrha and Ruby. Like just those two. It's kind of sad when you think about it.”

For a second, it looked like Taurus was going to continue baiting him, but he suddenly shook his head. “What are we arguing about this? You're ready to make me my missile, Mr. Arc?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Jaune folded his arms. “A deal's a deal, so you'll get your missile, asshole.”

A short growl escaped Taurus's throat and in a flash he'd stepped forward, his sword leaving its sheath with a speed that was impossible for the human eye to follow. Jaune winced, but the blade didn't stop at his throat. No, it stopped with the edge resting on the wire connecting Pyrrha's electromagnet to the car battery.

Fixing Jaune with a cold gaze, Taurus spoke slowly, deliberately and with a dangerous edge. “Never forget this, Arc: until such time as I allow you to leave this place, I own you. Not only do I own you, but I own your girlfriend here. And if you ever disrespect me again, I will cut this wire and then split the battery in two. From what I've heard, that shrapnel your bombs produce can take a long, long time to kill you. So she will die screaming.”
He withdrew the blade and sheathed it in a single, fluid motion. “Am I understood.”

Jaune cast his eyes down. “Okay. Y-you've made your point. I'll do whatever you want, just leave Pyrrha alone. Please.”

“Please... what?” Taurus demanded, hand going to his sword.

Silent throughout the conversation, Pyrrha watched the cat faunus woman's attention slip to Taurus. No one else was paying attention, but she could clearly see the other woman's jaw clench.

A brewing mutiny in the ranks? Pyrrha wondered if they could use that to their advantage.

Looking away as a sign that he was properly cowed, Jaune said, “Please, sir.”

Taurus grunted and gave a nod. “Good to see you're starting to see your place, human. You and your woman might make this out alive after all.” He turned and jerked his chin at the cat faunus. “Blake, make sure they have everything they need. But keep an eye on them. I don't want that clever mind getting the wrong idea.”

The cat, Blake, nodded sharply and waited for Taurus to leave before turning to Jaune. “What do you need?”

“If I say 'freedom', are you going to threaten us again?”

Blake's ears laid back in annoyance. “You understand the situation you're in. Cutting words and sarcasm aren't going to help you. Let's make things easier for everyone and you not give myself or my associates reasons to punish you.”

Jaw set, Jaune locked eyes with the painted Nevermore eyes on the woman's mask. She stared back, impassive and unreadable. He decided not to push his luck. Whoever she was in the White Fang, this Blake woman had some power and she didn't seem inclined to use it to do himself or Pyrrha harm, so he'd call that a win.

So he nodded and stood up to get a better vantage from which to survey the cavern.

That was the wrong move. A half dozen weapons were suddenly level at him as the White Fang underlings prepared to defend their boss's right hand woman. From what, Jaune didn't know considering that even with training from Pyrrha, the best he could have done vs a trained Dust-user was bleed aggressively at her.

Evidently, Blake was well aware of this, as she waved them off without comment and nodded for him to continue.

It took him a second to find his voice, but Jaune pretended he was talking to lab techs and not murderous terrorists. “Alright. Look, this is nowhere near the kind of lab I usually work with. I'm betting there's no rapid fabricators or 3-D printers down here with us, so let's keep it simple: I need work tables: like big, open spaces about this high so I can work comfortably on the components. I need whatever scrap iron and steel you can bring in. A soldering station, welding torch—I don't care if it's acetylene or something else as long as it works. Now I know you guys have a ton of my company's weapons, so I'm gonna need...”

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It was deeply concerning to Jaune just how much Arc Industries weaponry the White Fang brought down for him. If that was what they were willing to sacrifice to get a Jericho built, then they had to
have a truly massive stockpile. And he hadn't heard of any shipments going missing or attacks on deliveries. Where had all this come from?

He scowled as he gingerly used a set of forceps to extract a strip of delicate metal from the warhead of a Packbuster shell. Pyrrha, insisting that she was fine except for having to lug the battery around, was holding it steady while Dr. Yinsen looked on from the other side of the table.

“This is palladium,” Jaune explained for the doctor's benefit, since he was going to be playing the part of his legs so Pyrrha wouldn't have to run around the room. “Point zero-five grams. We're gonna need point six grams, so why don't you get started on breaking down the other eleven.”

“Happily.” said Dr. Yinsen and he got up to do so.

Meanwhile, Jaune leaned over the table and pulled a metal bowl and a bag of sand so they were in front of Pyrrha. He gave her a reassuring smile. “If my lovely assistant would be so kind as to prepare the mold?”

That made Pyrrha giggle. “Of course, Mr. Arc. Is this all part of the magic show?” She cracked open a bottle of water and started mixing it with the sand.

“More like miracle work.” Jaune admitted, sliding his chair over to where he was stoking a fire to heat their smallest crucible over.

A few hours later, point six grams of palladium glowed a bright, molten orange in that crucible as Dr. Yinsen removed it from the fire with a set of tongs.

“I usually do the pours when we work with the delicate stuff,” Pyrrha explained, trying to hide nervousness at someone else doing her job. Not that she thought she might be replaced, but her entire life had been centered around doing things herself to make sure they got done right. “Are you sure you wouldn't rather I do that?”

“Do not worry yourself, Miss Nikos. I am, after all a surgeon. Very steady hands.” The good doctor proved his point by slowly but deftly pouring the liquid metal into the mold she was holding, not spilling a drop.

After letting the metal cool and harden, Jaune took over again, removing a thin of palladium from its sandy resting place with a pair of forceps and moving it over to a round device made of glass and steel he'd constructed while they waited for the metal to heat up. Once the ring was in place, he placed the device's cover over it and gave it a twist.

There was a pop, a humm and then the whole thing lit up with a strak, blue-white radiance that bathed all three in its glow.

“Amazing...” murmured Dr. Yinsen. “What... is this?”

Jaune puffed up his chin with pride—and also relief, since he'd only come up with the math behind what he'd done in the past twenty-four hours. He'd been on edge this whole time wondering if it would even work or not. “A miniaturized arc reactor. We have a prototype that runs the Arc Industries main campus. With the output from this, I can run Pyrrha's heart for centuries.”

From beside him, Pyrrha nodded and gave the faunus doctor a serious look. “Or something large for about fifteen minutes.” Before he could reply to that and ask questions neither she nor Jaune were ready to explain with the White fang watching on camera, she touched the device in her chest and added, “Now if you don't mind, we need to prep for surgery again.”
“What the hell is that?” growled one of the White Fang guards assigned to camera duty. He was watching Pyrrha rise from her bed following her second surgery. Through the horribly grainy quality of the CCTV, something could easily be seen giving off a blue glow through the thin top she was wearing. “He's supposed to be building Adam his weapon.”

A hand touched his shoulder and he looked up to find Blake Belladonna, Adam Taurus's lieutenant standing over him, her cool, imperious look boring through him. As a rat faunus himself, the man hated the animal stereotypes humans saddled his people with. But damned if Blake wasn't the most catlike cat faunus he'd ever met, especially with her cold gaze that reminded him of his own tabby's ability to make it clear she didn't care whether he lived or died as long as she got what she wanted.

He suppressed a shudder.

“Nothing to worry about.” Blake said, voice even. “He took less than a day and did something to help his friend. That should help him worry less about her and put his mind on the work, right?”

The guard wasn't so sure about that. Wasn't Adam holding killing the woman over Arc's head? Not that he'd say that to Blake. Instead, he just nodded and went back to watching.

Meanwhile, back in the prison-slash-workshop, Dr. Yinsen, and a now battery-free Pyrrha had finished sorting and recovering materials from Jaune's list while the man himself had sequestered himself in a far corner of the cave with a sheaf of papers and pens. His placement was strategically chosen so that whoever was watching the cameras wouldn't be able to either see the blueprints he was drafting, nor work it out by following the movements of his pen.

Pyrrha took a moment's break from stoking a fire in the makeshift smelter they'd constructed to watch him. Fate preserve her and ensure Jaune never found out, but she loved to watch him work. All her life, she'd been around plenty of people who worked with their bodies. She'd become immunized to whatever interest physical exertion might pique in other women, but watching Jaune think? That captivated her.

The furrow of his brow. The slight working of his mouth as he almost-but-not-quite talked his problems out aloud. The giddy, almost mad light that sparked in his eyes as new ideas were birthed and joined with the old to make something that worked.

She would go to her grave before admitting it aloud, but she'd idolized the man from the moment she'd seen Helios in action. A beam of undulating, beautific light spearing out to sweep the hills of Menagerie of Grimm, annihilating an infestation that had cost at least two of her squadmates their lives and another the use of his legs in mere minutes. What it left behind was a promise that no more Grimm would haunt that place, that those hills were now safe to plant and build and live on.

And it all came from the head of a single person. Not just a single person, but an ordinary civilian; someone who had no awakened aura to protect them or grant them the power to use Dust, nor the training to fend off even a single Beowolf for more than a few seconds.

Armed with only ideas, Jaune Arc fought and protected as fiercely and as mightily as any Hunter
Pyrrha had ever met.

And though he would never know if she could help it, he'd nearly stolen her heart just with that. Three years of working closely with him, learning about the man behind the mind, his flaws, his vulnerabilities—and his surprising humanity—had done the rest.

He was still amazing her too. The house-sized prototype arc reactor had been something of Jaune's greatest failure. Despite wanting to give the four kingdoms clean, efficient energy, he failed to make the thing cost effective, much less to miniaturize it so it could become the portable, universal power source he imagined.

She imagined that for however long as they lived (which might not be very long at all), her deepest secret would be that it felt almost worth it to have taken that shrapnel for him when she realized that faced with her demise, he'd finally managed to make a breakthrough—the proof of which she would carry with her forever.

A pang of regret hit her as she tried to pretend not to watch him. No matter how strong and skilled she was, no matter how clever he was, the White Fang had sheer numbers and two Dust-users minimum. There was a good chance they might die soon. With a lot of things unsaid.

While she brooded over that, Jaune leapt up from where he was seated and moved over to a pile of crates upon which they'd erected a translucent piece of siding over a bare bulb powered by Pyrrha's old battery, forming a crude lightbox. With two fingers, the former prodigy gestured for his two companions to come see what he'd created.

Dr Yinsen took a moment to towel off the oil, rust and grime his hands had accumulated while breaking down so many weapons before coming over while Pyrrha made sure she hadn't mixed the iron and steel with other potentially useful metals before doing the same.

What Jaune had to show off was a stack of papers, each mostly wasted white space with a technical diagram of a what looked like a single byzantine component drawn on it.

The doctor gave the two of them a confused look. Pyrrha could only shrug: while she had an idea that Jaune was going to build some sort of weapon she could use, the nature of said weapon alluded her.

“Obviously, the working conditions here... well suck, so we can't build this-this missile—” at this he gave them a meaningful look that said he was building no such thing, “--the way I would at a factory or down in my lab at home. We're missing more than half the tools I normally use to put together complex, but luckily, I have four extra talented hands.

“So here's what we're gonna do. I'm in charge. I'll assign each of us a component, supervise you during the build and work from there. We won't bring it all together until the end, okay?”

As he said, okay, he put his hand down on the papers and pressed them down gently, keeping the individual sheets aligned. The light from below showed through each layer, superimposing the bottom drawings on those above them.

On the pages, the disparate components became a gestalt, revealing the true shape of Jaune Arc's newest brainchild.

Not a weapon, but armor. Powered armor.

Pyrrha tried not to show any emotion that might alert those watching them, but it was difficult. The best minds of Atlas had tried and failed on the subject of powered armor to augment Hunters and
soldiers. The best they had to offer were android warriors and piloted mecha.

Thanks to three years as the lab assistant to a man who was equally a certified genius and a scatterbrained eccentric, Pyrrha had acquired engineering knowledge many professors on the subject would envy. That's how she knew Jaune's match checked out. That it would work.

Being faced with peril seemed to agree with Jaune's intellect.

All that was left was to get to work.

Jaune set them to their tasks right after a disappointing evening meal of beans and hard bread. Pyrrha was on casting duty: sculpting molds out of wet sand to form the parts they would use. Dr. Yinsen with his surgeon's touch was set to work soldering circuit boards and threading wire. Jaune meanwhile set up a forge and began assembling pneumatic and hydraulic components.

They worked for six days straight, their only contact with their captors being the ones who brought them what passed for food, delivered whatever extra parts Jaune wanted, or provided them water. All the while, they worked hard to minimize how much the cameras saw and never ever spoke of what they were doing out loud.

What they didn't realize was that while they spotted all the cameras the White Fang was using to spy on them, they hadn't spotted all the cameras in the room.

As the trio worked late into the night in the hopes of catching their observers asleep, Blake watched the video feed from one of her concealed high definition micro cameras with interest. Jaune was typing furiously on the five year old laptop he's convinced Adam Taurus's people he needed, sending programming to a device Dr. Yinsen was latching closed around Pyrrha's lower leg like a steel cage.

After several minutes and the twin of the 'cage' being put into place on Pyrrha's other leg and also connected to the laptop, Pyrrha rolled off the bed she had been lying on and started to walk.

Blake's cat-yellow eyes narrowed with interest. Her superiors would want to know about this, whatever Arc was planning. Not Adam Taurus; she'd leave off that as long as possible. No, her real employers.

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By the eighth day, Adam Taurus's patience finally wore thin. The trio were warned of his coming by shouts and curses in the hallway. Within moments, the duel steel doors were thrown open so hard they crashed into the stone walls surrounding them.

Taurus stormed in, jaw set in a snarl. Black followed him along with a retinue of armed guards. Without breaking stride, Taurus went straight for where Jaune was leaning over an assemblage of the circuit boards Dr. Yinsen had made. One hand swept the components and tools aside, the other grasped a generous handful of blonde hair, pulled Jaune's head back, then slammed it into the table.

"Where. Is. My. Missile!?" He shouted, punctuating every word with another introduction between Jaune's head and the table.

Caught completely off guard, Jaune managed his usual eloquence. "Ow! Ow! What the—ow! I'm building as fast as I can! Why with the hitting?"

Still holding Jaune's hair in his fist, Taurus forced the smaller man to stand up and face him,
bringing his masked face uncomfortably close. “It has been eight days. You have two assistants. There should be results, and yet I fail to see anything that resembles a Jericho missile.”

Still feeling woozy from the assault, Jaune took a moment to get steady. “What do you expect? I'm trying to build this thing in a cave with a box of scraps! You're lucky it looks like anything at all at this stage.”

For a long moment Taurus stared at him, lips pursed as he tried to dissect the other man's head with his brain. “Somehow, I don't believe you.” With that, he let go of Jaune and turned, searching the room before he found Pyrrha.

With chilling speed, he closed on the former warrior. She dropped into a defensive stance to meet him. Even with his Grimm mask on, the two locked each other in their sights. They both knew he was going to try and threaten her to motivate Jaune and Pyrrha intended to make him pay a price to do so.

She didn't get a chance. A slim ribbon wrapped her arms, pining them to her torso. Even as she flexed, trying to burst what should have been a flimsy binding, a mighty tug sent her stumbling out of Adam's path and the ribbon was joined by an arm that caught her with wiry strength. Cold, sharp steel pressed against her throat.

“Let's all make this very simple.” Blake said, craning her head so she was talking past Pyrrha's ear. “We are losing patience. If you're stalling you have to know no one is going to find you if they haven't by now.” She turned her head to spare a look at Adam who was no doubt glaring at her from under his mask for stealing his thunder. She flicked an ear at him, wordlessly pointing out that sometimes a calm, cool head was better even at gunship diplomacy.

Still, she gave the man an opening. “One more week...”

“One day.” Taurus cut her off firmly.

Blake nodded. “One day. You all have one more day to finish what you're doing. If you don't deliver the Jericho by then... well there are many incredibly painful injuries I can inflict on your friend here that will neither kill her nor reduce her capacity to help you get your work done.”

She released Pyrrha and with a swift movement, unwrapped the ribbon from her arms. When she went to push the former Huntress forward and out of physical melee range, she was too slow. Pyrrha rounded on her and went low, coming up with a powerful uppercut.

All her frustration, all her annoyance and shame at being put into the role of hostage and damsel was poured into the hit, which caught Blake in the chin and lifted her off the floor. If the cat faunus didn't have an unlocked aura of her own, it might have broken her jaw. Instead, she reacted with the momentum and jumped backward, turning the motion into a back flip and landing in a crouch a yard away.

Point made, Pyrrha meekly raised her hands as every gun in the room turned her way. “Sorry,” she said sweetly as if she actually was.

Blake worked her jaw, making sure all the tendons and bones were still in place before rising to her full height. “I really wish we'd actually gotten to fight instead of you getting KO'd by that shell.”

“Maybe that will still happen in the future.” Pyrrha studied the other woman intently. There were many layers to the White Fang lieutenant that she hadn't parsed yet. For one, unlike every single other member of the group she'd seen so far, there was no passionate hatred for humans, no
righteous zealotry. Blake was all business. And Pyrrha had no idea whether that was a good or bad thing in terms of her, Jaune and Dr. Yinsen's survival.

“If you're done measuring... whatever it is women measure...” Taurus grimaced sourly as he walked past Blake, who was similarly sizing Pyrrha up. He turned and pinned Jaune with a hateful gaze, “You do not want to know what will happen if you disappoint me.”

When he left, the rest of the guards went with him. Blake was last to leave, running her gaze over all three captives one last time before nodding subtly and leaving as well.

The imprisoned trio were silent for a long moment before Dr. Yinsen moved over to Jaune. “One day? We can't possibly...”

“We can.” Jaune was still rubbing his head. “It'll take an all-nighter, but we can do it.” He took a long, deep breath, held it, then let it go slowly before stiffening his back. “Pyr. Assemblage Get everything on the rack or up on the winches. Doc, help her.”

“What about you?” Dr. Yinsen was already moving as he spoke.

Jaune rolled his neck and headed for the comparatively ancient laptop. “I have eight hours of coding ahead of me.”

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The biggest obstacle, Jaune thought in the wee hours of the night as he sat coding line after line of code, was that everything they had down in their little cave was rationed. Enough instant coffee for maybe two cups a day, twice that amount of water, just enough food to survive on. There wasn't all that much to keep their energy up.

It made sense. He would do the same if he was trying to hold prisoners. It kept them from making or carrying out plans with a clear mind late at night. Or at least it made it more difficult. Jaune just wished they'd gone with another sure-fire plan to keep a prisoner's thoughts cloudy: giving them lots of booze. He would very much have liked to have a drink.

“Jaune?” There was a light touch on his shoulder, one so familiar that he didn't even need to hear her voice to know it was Pyrrha.

He turned to find her standing over him, looking tired and pensive. “Hey Pyr. Everything ready on your end?”

She offered a grateful smile and took a seat beside her. “Yes. We just finished.” She nodded in the direction of Dr. Yinsen, who had collapsed on his cot, snoring softly. “I came over to see if you needed any help.”

“No, it's really just coding left. I wish we had time to test this out first, but we don't so I need to double check everything I put down. You should probably get as much sleep as you can in the meantime.” The programming was all on him—had to be all on him. As much as Pyrrha had learned working by his side, computers were not her forte and Dr. Yinsen wasn't any better with them.

Pyrrha hummed her understanding, but didn't move. After a long few minutes, she said. “I'm actually more concerned about you right now.”

“Me?” He didn't look away from the screen, though he did register the oddness of her ton. “I'm way more worried about you.”
A soft rustle indicated she was shaking her head. “But I'm going to be protected on top of my aura. I will be fine but you...” she paused, trying to choose the right phrasing. When she couldn't come up with anything that didn't sound derogatory or condescending, she took another tack. “Jaune... I know you tried to get into a combat academy, but you hardly talk about it. What do you know about Aura?”

“Not a lot,” he said hesitantly, “Actually nothing. I never even got a foot in the door.”

He glanced aside to find green eyes widening in surprise. “Oh. Well... the Aura is an extension of our souls made manifest. Every living thing except the Grimm—if they even are alive—has an aura, but they typically remain unawakened. Once awakened, Aura can be used to protect you, heal you, ignite Dust, and power one's Semblance.”

Even as Jaune turned to fully face her, she looked away, a light blush dusting her face as she got to the point. “Usually, one's Aura is awakened through difficult training and manifests during a moment of great stress. In modern times, those times of great stress are engineered within the first week or two at combat academies.

“However, there is another, more ancient way. In times long past, before the Great War, Auras were unlocked through a sacred rite, the power shared only by those who shared the bonds of family... or closer.” She bit her lip, still looking away. “Mine is one of the families that continued this tradition. I know the rite and... as you said before, you and I are very much each other's family.” Her hand, still on his shoulder, gave it a light squeeze.

Jaune blinked as he took in this new information. Aura, it seemed, was the source of the seeming invincibility of Hunters and Pyrrha was offering it to him. By his nature, he considered a better application for said gift. “But I at least know how to fight. What about the Doc? He's gonna need protection more than me.”

While she knew she should feel some shame at it, Pyrrha felt none as she shook her head. “I do not... care enough about Dr. Yinsen for the ritual to work. You are the one I want to protect, Jaune; the only one I believe I will be able to make the ritual work on. The only remaining caveat is that you have to accept it.”

His own face heated by the words that felt like they'd been left unsaid, Jaune gave a wordless nod.

“Alright...” Pyrrha whispered mostly to herself. She reached up and took hold of his other shoulder with her free hand, turning him closer to face her. One hand trailed down from his shoulder to his chest to fit over his heart while she locked eyes with him. His heartbeat seemed to amplify, traveling up the heel of her palm and up her arm to be answered by her own at which point they synched and Pyrrha started speaking—chanting, really.

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

Something deep inside Jaune vibrated like a plucked string and from that sensation, warmth spread throughout his body, gentle yet powerful and unyielding. It was around that time that he realized Pyrrha was glowing, a nimbus of dark red emanating from her. That glow was soon joined by a golden one that shed its light across the entire cavern.

They stood there for a long while, their eyes still engaged. Surprise was creeping into Pyrrha's. “Your Aura is very strong,” she commented, “You would have made an exceptional Hunter.”
That was the wrong thing to say. Jaune's glow went out and he sagged, tearing his gaze away from hers. She was quick to stop him from withdrawing, cupping his chin in the hand that had been on his chest. “Jaune, you have to understand by now that you not becoming a Hunter is the best thing that could have happened to this world.”

“Right up until my weapons ended up with the White Fang and they started murdering people,” he muttered.

“We will deal with that,” she said firmly, her own frame sagging from the exertion of awakening his Aura. “First, we need to survive this.”

Her suddenly increased fatigue didn't go unnoticed by Jaune whose brows knotted in concern. “Are you alright?”

“I used a great deal of my Aura to awaken yours. I'll be fine in a few minutes.”

Jaune reached up and gently took her arm. “Let's try a few hours. You need to get to bed.”

Chapter End Notes

As it turns out, it didn't fit at all trying to be subtle about what character Blake is fused with. I think you can all guess by now.

I want to assure you folks that Jaune isn't going to be relegated to mission control for the whole story. As Alton Brown would say, your patience will be rewarded and what comes later for Jaune plays off the many ways he is not Tony Stark and also an important bit of mythology people forget about Crocea Mors.

Also, my apologies to fans of Weiss. While I plan to give her a cameo soon, everything about the Schnee scream 'Justin Hammer', so Weiss is going to have to wait for next story arc to get in on this. As much as it pains me, Nora is going to have to wait too :(. Next chapter is where this fusion really goes off the rails from the MCU Iron Man. The escape fight and the MK-1 armor are going
The White Fang had a reputation for rabid fanaticism. If media reports throughout the four kingdoms to be believed, they were tireless madmen who kept themselves up at night trying to think up new and horrible ways to destroy all that was right and good in society.

Evidently, the two members Blake found manning the monitors just past dawn the next morning hadn't gotten the memo because they were both snoring away when she entered the monitor room. One even had his thumb in his mouth.

On the monitor, Dr. Yinsen was awake early, doing something on the laptop. Thanks to her painstaking attention to detail, Blake noticed how strategically the discarded crates and detritus had been arranged to hide the cables running from the laptop and something in the cameras' blind spots.

Arc and company were moving early. She was impressed, but that also changed her clock as well. Being out of the camp before whatever they did was priority one. Taking a big risk, she opened her scroll and found the signal from the cameras the White Fang didn't know about.

What she saw made her feel a tiny twinge of sympathy for whoever was going to try and stop the trio. A very tiny one.

Closing the scroll, she turned and left the monitoring room. Her report to her superiors would be interesting indeed.

The interior braces clamped over Pyrrha's calves like a steel trap, the cold of the metal chilling her even through the sheets she was swaddled in as insulation. Jaune locked them in place and started working his way up: knee joints, thighs, connected to a girdle then to the inner chest piece that connected to the arms, ending in a thick pair of welding gauntlets because there was no time for Jaune to design articulated hands, much less build them.

Once the exoskeleton was on, he started fitting together the outer armor, connecting it to actuators. The two halves of the chest plate were lowered down on winches and bolted together as rapidly as Jaune dared do so. Another set of pneumatic winches fitted the back plate, along with the fuel tanks and accompanying rockets into place.

Every connection had to be linked into the hastily built microcomputer housed in the chest plate, slowing their progress more than the need to make sure every piece was secured into place already was. Jaune was already sweating and there weren't even done suiting Pyrrha up yet.

Stepping back, he wiped his forehead with his bare arm. “How're we doing on th eupload, Doc?”

“Fifty-seven percent,” reported Yinsen. “This operating system is rubbish.”

“She wrote it in three hours; beggars can't be choosers.” Jaune then looked up at Pyrrha, who had her eyes closed as she tried to focus herself. “How about you, Pyr? How're you doing?”

She nodded, the only motion the offline armor allowed her. “As well as I can be, I suppose. Trying
to go over some basic technique in my head—it's been a very long time since I've fought completely hand-to-hand.” She gave him a pensive look. “I still think it should be you in the armor.”

Jaune fought down the little pang of jealousy that made itself known. The twelve year-old boy in him wanted—really wanted to be the first to take the powered armor for a spin; to run faster, jump higher and generally be the badass he always wanted to be. The part of him that had common sense, however knew the situation and made sure he made the right choice instead of the more immediately satisfying one.

So he shook his head.

“Six more weeks of R&D, materials that weren't scrounged out of scrap, and about three million lien worth of armor and weapons and I might be able to take these guys. But what we have right now? I'm only able to make something to protect against conventional gunfire and multiply the user's strength and speed. You're the best—the only fighter—we've got. Besides, the arc reactor is powering this and we've only got the resources for one.” He offered her a confident smile. “It's got to be you, Pyrrha, and frankly, I can't think of anyone I'd trust more with this.”

The smile she sent back in his direction was radiant. “Thank you, Jaune. I'll do everything I can to reward your faith in me.”

Jaune took a deep breath. There was another reason he wished it was him in the armor. He absolutely hated the idea of throwing Pyrrha—shrapnel riddled chest cavity and all—out in front like this. He wouldn't want to put anyone in that position, but especially not Pyrrha.

Three years ago, he'd spent several days thinking she was going to strangle him in his sleep. Once he'd gotten over that issue, it turned out that she was a bright, strong, caring, highly capable and intelligent woman who he was lucky to get to spend almost every day with. She was just too important to him lose. Far too important.

He was not lying when he told Adam the White Fang would get nothing if anything happened to her, because nothing they could have done to him would have been worse after that.

With every possible worst case scenario and point of failure swirling around in his head, his stomach was starting to churn. Fighting it all down, he swallowed and said, “I don't doubt it for a moment, Pyr. Now let's get you buttoned up.”

Ratchet in hand, he attacked the remaining bolts to seal Pyrrha in. As he did so, a shout reached them through the heavy steel doors that separated their cavern from the rest of the cave system. More followed, along with the faint pounding of feet.

Dr. Yinsen looked up, frowning. “Sixty-nine percent. We aren't going to have enough time.”

Jaune redoubled his efforts. “Keep steady, Doc. We have a contingency for this.”

In this case, the 'contingency' was a crude bomb made from the remains of about five missiles rigged to the door. The next people to open that door was not going to survive. The others hadn't argued with him, Pyrrha in particular seemed to be content to act like it wasn't even there. Jaune wished he could too—that he had any other options, but they were too low on resources and time to rig up something less-lethal.

Dr. Yinsen didn't seem to want to discuss it either, because he only replied with, “Seventy-percent.”

Outside the cavern, the tromp of boots grew louder along with the shouting. Jaun tried to drown
them out as the final bolt went tight. “Got it.” he announced, then stood up. He had to get on his
tip-toes to reach the face plate thanks to the armored boots and attached braces adding a good foot
to Pyrrha's height.

When his hands closed on the plate, his eyes met hers. “Good luck,” he said softly.

“You too,” she said, her own tone gentle, nervous. With that, Jaune pulled the faceplate closed until
the latches clicked into place. Pyrrha's face was replaced by a steel, shapeless mask with a grate
over the mouth to let her breath and dark hollows where the lights of the suit's sensors hadn't come
on yet.

Jaune stared into those dark pits, imagining that he could still see the lively, green eyes beyond.

Then the doors exploded.

There hadn't been much Dust in the bomb; ninety-percent of Arc Industries technology used
alternative accelerants and power sources. The reason being that under normal circumstances, a
person without an unlocked aura couldn't trigger Dust effects and machines were right out. The
best that could be hoped for was setting the Dust off with a conventional explosive, which merely
had the effect of augmenting the explosive.

What little Dust they did have access to, Jaune had arranged into a shaped charge, pointing outward
toward the doors. The resultant explosion ripped the steel doors off their hinges, tore them to
shreds of deadly shrapnel at their center, and hurled the rest into the hallway.

After a few pained shouts and then the heavy, metallic clang of the doors hitting the ground, the
cavern and hallway beyond went silent.

Against his will, Jaune found himself estimating based on the voices he'd heard. If his guess was
right, he'd just taken the lives of five men. Drawing in a long, deep breath, Jaune turned and walked
over to Dr. Yensin. “How're we doing?” he asked, trying not to let his voice break.

“Seventy-eight percent,” replied the Doctor. He cast a nervous glace toward the door. The progress
bar was moving faster now that all the connections had been made in the suit. Still, that explosion
hadn't been quiet, and even as he listened, there was more distant shouting. “We don't have enough
time.”

“We've got enough time,” said Jaune, not really believing it himself. “Just keep steady.”

“No we don’t.” The shouts were coming closer and the status bar passed eighty-three percent.
Making up his mind, he stood, nearly knocking Jaune over. “I am going to buy you some time.”

“What are you doing?” Jaune blinked in confusion as the Doctor dashed across the cavern to the
still-smoking doors. “Yinsen? Yinsen?!”

Reaching the doors, Yinsen found two smoking corpses half-buried beneath the steel slabs with
evidence that more were completely concealed. One of the men's assault rifles lay on the stone
floor, undamaged if covered in soot and dust. He picked it up and checked the magazine and
chamber.

Casting a look back to Jaune, he said, “I will buy you the time you need.” With that, he dashed out
into the hallway, firing the rifle overhead.

Jaune took a half-step to follow, but out of the corner of his eye, he saw the progress bar hit ninety
percent. No. He had to stay here with Pyrrha.
The shouting was growing louder and the shots from Dr. Yinsen's gun more faint. At least as long as he could hear that, Jaune knew the older man was safe.

Ninety-four percent.

Someone was coming up the passages from another branch than the one Dr. Yinsen went down. He'd been right: they didn't have enough time.

Pyrrha must have heard them too because the next thing her heard was her voice, muffled and echoing inside the suit. “How long, Jaune?”

“Too long.” He didn't see the point of lying, seeing as he could now make out shadows being cast by White Fang members making their way toward the room. They slowed down and quieted down as they noticed the devastation around the cavern entrance. “I'm going to try something.”

“No. find a place to hide. You can't do what Dr. Yinsen did.” Pyrrha pled.

Stepping back from the table, Jaune kept one eye on the laptop and one on the door. Making sure he was clearly visible from the door, he raised his hands. “Don't worry. I'm not going to leave you.”

Almost as soon as he said that, a rifle-mounted flashlight all but blinded him. “You! Don't move!” came a demanding voice. Four White Fang members entered; three in a wedge pattern up front, all carrying assault rifles. Behind them came a man holding a metal crossbow.

Archaic-style weapon meant Dust-user. All Jaune wondered was whether it became a melee weapon, or some sort of gun that completely obviated having a crossbow. Some hunters were beyond eccentric when it came to their weapons.

“I'm not!” Jaune cried out, “Look, that explosion? Not on purpose. It was a badly thought out escape attempt and I'm sorry.”

The three goons exchanged looks, wondering just what the hell he'd been planning if killing five of their guys was a failure. That kept their attention squarely on him and not the humanoid mass standing in a grid of scaffolding and hanging wire just behind them and to their right.

Nintey-nine... one hundred.

The fuses in the cavern blew in unison as the last of the suit's capacitors drew one more surge of power, killing the lights. The sensor arrays powered up alongside the rest of the suit, the black holes of the suit's eyes suddenly flaring to life in the form of two blue beacons that cut through the darkness.

“... sorry you're all such jerks!” Jaune finished before diving for cover.

In their confusion, two of the goons were caught looking in Jaune's direction instead of where all the whirring and sounds of power flowing was coming from. That was their last mistake. A powerful, rubber-encased fist struck one along the ribs, shattering them and lifting the man off his feet to slam him into the one standing at point. The impact was strong enough to send both flying into a work table that broke as they struck it and the implements set upon it.

Neither got up. Neither groaned.

In the darkness, their attacker froze. The missiles' guidance sensors showed the room in night vision, and Pyrrha saw the damage she'd done in full; a twisted heap of broken and unmoving limbs. The goons hadn't had their Auras unlocked, and the suit multiplied her already impressive strength
to the point that a car crash would have been more gentle. Those two were dead before their bodies settled. She'd never killed anyone before and it wasn't a good feeling.

Her horror was cut short when the last rifle-wielding goon, in a feat of both supreme bravery and profound stupidity, opened up on her, full auto. Steady patter of bullets bounced off her breastplate, occasionally getting too-near the ventilation port where the arc reactor resided. It reminded her that she was fighting for their lives.

She ignored the gunfire and lunged forward, slamming a palm heel strike into the man's sternum. Even though she pulled her punch, he was launched five feet straight back to collapse, rolling in the dust. The fact that he managed to let out a groan was heartening.

What was less heartening was a sound familiar to almost all modern Hunters: a weapon being reconfigured.

Pyrrha turned to catch the Dust-user in the middle of his weapons' change. The crossbow's arms had come together to form a brutal-looking pick head while the main body of the crossbow and loading carousel holding the weapon's quarrel shifted around to point in the opposite direction from the pick.

With a grunt of effort, the Dust-user swung the pick around in the whirlwind display before raising it high and swinging for her head. A pull of the trigger fired a bolt out of the opposite direction, the recoil boosting that momentum of the attack.

Peeking from behind the table, Jaune felt his heart go up into his throat. Outlined in the white of his aura, the White fang Dust-user didn't waste any time going straight for a killing blow. A pick was the absolute worse weapon that could have been brought to bear against the suit. With its small surface area on the striking surface, it could, with sufficient force, pierce right through even the best-designed armor.

And despite his best efforts, Pyrrha was not wearing the best designed armor.

His fears were averted however, when Pyrrha met the attack with a cross-arm block that caught the pick just below the head, halting it an inch from her head. That's when Jaune realized that the pick-wielder's wasn't the only aura. The white aura had merely made it harder to see the darker red he remembered shrouding Pyrrha when she unlocked his aura. It was riming every part of the armor as if it were part of her body.

Well that was unexpected. He wondered if Aura could repair mechanical damage the same way it did biological. More to the point, he wondered just how much defense armor plus Aura afforded. He also hoped he wouldn't get to see the limits of that combination anytime in the near future.

Pyrrha pushed the Dust-user back, but her follow-up blow was fended off by his pick. The second time she went in for the attack, she knocked the weapon aside, then after a feint, dropped down for a leg sweep.

Or at least that's what she intended. If she were in her normal non-powered armor, wielding her spear and shield, there would have been no problems. In the cobbled-together powered armor, she had no end to them. First and foremost, she was a good foot taller than normal, so when her muscle memory told her to kick out, she was still in the middle of dropping to the ground, meaning all she did was throw off her balance. Attempting to correct this shifted the armor's mass around in ways her won body would never move and she wound up toppling over on her chest with a clang.

The Dust-user stared at her for a moment, then realized what just happened and raised his weapon
to capitalize on it. He'd taken too long, however, and Pyrrha was able to roll out of the way, the recoil-boosted pick shattering a fist-sized crater in the rock.

Now on her back, Pyrrha picked out, slamming her heel into his knee. The only reason his kneecap didn't shatter was his Aura, which turned the crippling blow into a two-foot slide backward. It opened up enough space for Pyrrha to roll forward and come up on her feet, throwing an uppercut in his direction which he blocked with the pick.

Jumping back from the blow, the Dust-user whipped his pick around behind him, pounded it on the ground and fired, the recoil hurling him into the air. Now airborne, he brought the pick back for a massive overhead swing, once more aimed for Pyrrha's helmeted skull.

The warrior in question moved with Aura and mechanically-enhanced speed, stepping under the blow and thrusting her own fist into his gut from below.

The Aura absorbed damage, but not momentum with an 'urk', the White Fang Dust-user was hurled vertically into the ceiling of the cavern. Only his Aura saved him from being impaled on a stalactite. The hanging stone turned to powder against his back and he made it all the way to the ceiling proper, slamming into it with main force before falling back to earth. The entire ordeal meant that his Aura was nil by the time his comatose body came to rest, his weapon bouncing out of his grasp and across the floor.

Pyrrha goggled. Two hits. Really, just one hit considering how little the kick to the shin did. She'd never been able to deplete someone's aura with just two hits before. Staring down at her hands and the armor on his forearms, she marveled at what she was able to do now.

The sound of a weapon transforming once more caught her attention. For a split second, she caught Jaune staring at the captured Dust-user's weapon like a kid with a new toy. The second he felt her gaze on him, he looked up and did his best to school his profession. “Y-you ready to go?” He asked, unconsciously trying to pose action hero style with the crossbow.

“Let's hurry up and find Dr. Yinsen.” Pyrrha agreed. She led the way out.

Chapter End Notes

I didn't expect the escape to be so long, so I'm going to split it in half: Prototype and Test Run.

A few notes here: First, I'm sure some people won't like it, but since Pyrrha is Iron Man/Hematite here, she also gets a share of the slapstick Tony got in the movies. Loss of dignity knows no gender. Along those same lines, I know everyone wants Jaune to be badass and it's coming, but he's not keeping the pick-bow—it's a dumb weapon and is only here because I wanted a Dust weapon that could threaten powered armor. He'll get something better later.

Another important difference here from the movie at least is that killing a who pile of dudes here is going to weigh on Our Heroes way more than Tony and they will address the White Fang on a deeper level than just a Gulmira fight. Because it's not just the MCU, its RWBY and I think the plight of the faunus is something these characters would tackle once it's thrown in their faces.
I have solidified the characters now. If you don't want spoilers for that, stop reading now:

Blake – Black Widow
Ren – Phil Coulson/Hawkeye
Nora – Thor
Ruby – Rhodey
Yang – as herself (You would think Hulk. You would be wrong. Hulk is a secret)
Weiss – Justine Hammer/Black Cat
The thing about scratch-built suits of powered armor was that they weren't the stealthiest things in
the world. The constant whirring of servos, the hiss of pneumatic, and the the clanging stomp of its
tread made sure every White Fang member between them and the exit knew Pyrrha was coming
from dozens of yards away.

Thanks to the poor lighting in the passages and the mounting panic that ran rampant through their
ranks as group after group called out in alarm, opened fire and then fell silent, sometimes after
sharp screams, that was turning out to be an advantage.

Around the next corner, Pyrrha came face-to-face with five gunmen obviously sent to hold the line
ahead of another set of steel doors. They'd overturned tables and hunkered down on the other side
of rocky outcroppings in an attempt to gain some cover. As soon as they sighted the demonic blue
glare that preceded Pyrrha in the armor, they opened fire.

Sparks lit the room as bullets pattered and ricocheted off the steel plates backed by Aura. It didn't
take the gunmen long to learn the lesson all the others before them had: their conventional bullets
were going to do nothing.

Four of them realized this faster then the fifth, breaking from their cover to fall back. By the time
the fifth man realized what happened, his fellows were already pushing the doors closed behind
them. He took one look at the looming, shadowy hulk stomping toward him and decided this wasn't
a fight he wanted anymore.

“Wait!” He shouted to his traitorous comrades. Wait, don't leave me here! Don't leave--” the doors
slammed in his face, “me?” He turned, looking up at his approaching doom with wide eyes.

Pyrrha stepped up directly before him, drew back a fist, and pounded it into the door right next to
his head, leaving a six inch dent. The man's eyes rolled up in his head at the same time his pants
became extremely damp. With a whimper, he passed out cold.

Inside her face plate, Pyrrha allowed herself a small smirk. Making people pass out in terror was a
lot more rewarding then shattering their bones.

Speaking of, however... She reared back and planted a forward kick into the door, adding another
dent and straining both the metal bar keeping it closed and the hinges. A second kick finished it,
the hinges snapping and the steel doors crashing down knocking the four cowardly White Fang
members into flat heaps of groaning agony.

Beyond, the last length of that passage led into the more widely-used and better lit tunnels. For the
first time in the armor, Pyrrha emerged into full light. Jaune, following behind and trying to offer
cover with his captured weapon finally got a look at his fully operational creation.

The suit was dull gray from its origins as scrap metal. The only sense of symmetry came from the
face plate and chest piece; the arms and legs were mismatched with whatever working part they
could find welded into place. The back was slightly hunched from the well-protected fuel tanks
there—Jaune's last ditch escape plan.

He didn't get time to admire his handiwork because, just at the top of the tunnel were another pair
of White Fang members, possibly the ballsiest ones in the entire camp seeing as they charged Pyrrha head-on, submachine guns blazing.

Pyrrha met the first one with a backhand that turned him around a full three-hundred and sixty degrees before he hit the ground. She put too much power into it though, and her arm slammed into the rock face just past him, getting stuck fast in the stone.

As she worked to get free, the other man approached from her blindside, trying to find an angle that would let him shoot her in the eye.

There was a crack—the tell-tale sound of a Dust-weapon firing, and the gunman dropped, blood blossoming from a horrible wound in his throat.

Pyrrha finally got herself free only to find her second foe dead on the floor. Turning further, she found Jaune, Dust weapon lowered to his side, eyes averted from what he'd done.

“Jaune...” she started.

“We need to keep going,” he replied with a strained voice, all but begging her to drop the subject. Reluctantly, she obliged, only taking time out to put a hand on his shoulder and offer a gentle squeeze of support before starting off again.

Everything, she realized, had changed from the moment they got out of that humvee and they weren't going to fall back into place just because they escaped—if they escaped. She didn't feel like talking about it either—but she knew both of them would have to eventually.

In suddenly oppressive silence, she led on. The tunnels were noticeably on an uphill grade now, and Jaune could feel air moving around them as they emerged into a small cavern honeycombed with entrances and exits of other tunnels. The area was being used as a storage depot for whatever supplies couldn't be left outside in the elements; mostly crates lined with straw and/or covered with tarps.

Whatever was in the crates went unnoticed by the two when they saw the person in the middle of the room.

Dr. Yinsen was lying sprawled in an uncomfortable position across a number of small, broken crates. Blood stained his shirt over his stomach. A gut wound that promised a slow, agonizing death. Neither Jaune nor Pyrrha had an doubt whose blade had caused it.

“Doctor!” Pyrrha was the first to reach him. The faunus doctor was still breathing and upon hearing her voice, cracked his eyes open. Said eyes were bleary and unfocused, but it was simple enough for him to see she was in full armor.

“I-I see I brought you enough time.”

Jaune finally arrived, biting back his own reaction at seeing how badly injured his friend was. “That you did, Doc.” Hoping against all his understanding of biology, he asked, “Can you walk? We need to get out of here before more bad guys show up.”

Shivering, Dr. Yinsen managed to shake his head. “I-it's too late. Too late for m-me.”

“No it isn't Pyrrha said firmly, stopping as she prepared to pick him up. “I can carry you. You are going to see your family again.”

With what little strength he had left, the good doctor waved her off. “I'm g-going to see them now.”
“You mean...” Jaune started.

“They're all dead.” Pyrrha's voice was dull and flat as the revelation struck her. One hand when to her chest to rest over where the arc reactor and electromagnet resided. “That's why you worked so hard to find a way to save the 'walking dead’.”

Dr. Yinsen nodded, the shuddering stealing his voice for a time. He adjusted his head so he could see both of them in his field of vision. “D-don't let me hold you back. I-it's alright. I want this.” He took a labored breath. “I want this.” Fixing them with a serious look, he said, “Just... j-just don't waste what you've been given. Don't take things... for granted.” He trailed off into more troubled wheezing.

At the same time, movement out of the corner of his eye caught Jaune's attention. E looked up just in time to spot Adam Taurus leveling a rocket-propelled grenade launcher at Pyrrha. Even as he shouted a warning, her raised his captured Dust-crossbow and started pulling the trigger.

He ended up shooting first, the Dust-propelled crossbow bolts missing twice, but they struck the rock wall, kicking up a cloud of gravel that forced Adam to flinch in order to save his eyesight, turning the rocket launcher aside—right as he was pulling the trigger. The rocket exited the barrel of its launcher and traveled all of four inches before hitting the same rock wall.

The rocket hadn't flown far enough for the primary ignition to be set, but the round still exploded with enough force to turn a good chunk of the wall into a loud of shrapnel. Adam's Aura protected him from most of it, but a fist-sized rock hit his mask, shattering it directly into the left side of his head and sending fragments raking the flesh underneath.

Screaming, Adam clutched his mutilated face and fell back staggering for cover back down the tunnel he'd emerged from.

“Go.” Dr. Yinsen ordered with a feeble second wind.

“But we could...” Pyrrha started to protest.

“I am a surgeon.” the man replied flatly, “I know when there is nothing more that can be done. He nodded toward Jaune, who was still rooted to the stop in disbelief at his sudden stroke of luck. “Besides, I would slow you down... and keep you from protecting someone important to you.”

With that said, he laid his head back, staring at the ceiling. He was still breathing, but so shallowly that it was clear that wouldn't be the case very long.

As gently as she could in the suit, Pyrrha closed his eyes for him and rose. This snapped Jaune out of his moment and he looked over to the doctor. “Is he...?”

“He's right.” Pyrrha said, voice thick as she tried to keep from sobbing, “There isn't anything we can do for him. W-we need to keep going.”

Whether or not she meant to echo what he'd said earlier, Jaune recognized the same tone and merely nodded, gesturing for her to lead the way.

More silence closed on on them even as the daylight started to make its appearance in the tunnels revealing that freedom was very close. Soon, the quiet became all the more bothersome as it wasn't just them: they didn't hear anymore chatter or movement from the White Fang anymore.

As they approached the entrance, Pyrrha stopped, holding up a hand to warn Jaune to do the same.
“...What's up?”

“We haven't run into anyone for a while. No one has come at us from behind, either,” she observed quietly. “It's very likely that they've almost all made it outside by now—and that they'll be waiting for us, ready to fire everything.”

'Everything' could be a lot considering how much Arc Industries tech the White Fang had gotten its hands on. And that wasn't counting Dust-users. Adam was accounted for, but Blake wasn't accounted for and they never did learn how many the terrorists had aside from her.

“All ideas?” she asked.

Jaune thought for a moment, considering what they had to work with versus what they were likely up against. As he considered, he pulled the drum magazine out of his crossbow and checked the number of bolts left: Four; each packed in a Dust cartridge. Even if he was practiced with it, he wasn't going to snipe their way out of this.

Then he examined the crossbow's firing mechanism and got an idea. Out came the screwdriver he'd stolen from the makeshift lab before they'd left. Always keep a screwdriver around, he'd often said, you'll never know when you might need it.

“We're going to fly out from here,” he proudly announced as he quickly disassembled the weapon's housing.

“I'm pretty sure we've be blown out of the sky.” Pyrrha peered up toward the cave entrance where everything was perfectly quiet.

Jaune grinned and pulled out the firing mechanism. “Not if they have more important things to worry about...”

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Exactly as Pyrrha predicted, the survivors of the White Fang encampment were arrayed outside the entrance. Exactly as Jaune quietly bet on, said entrance also served as a depot for all their ill-gotten weapons and ammo, many examples of which were being used as cover.

The fatal error the faunus terrorists had made was that none of them had gathered any intel on the enemy. All they knew was that a prisoner had escaped and was killing their way out of the depths. Even the lone Dust-user, armed with a rifle and standing far back atop a shipping container full of Dust crystals hijacked from the Schnee Dust Company, expected to just unleash hell on whoever and whatever came out of the cave.

None of them expected said 'whatever' to come barreling out of the cave's throat riding a jet of flame, trailing a column of black smoke and carrying a blonde man bridal style.

They all opened fire, but as soon as it cleared the cave, the metallic demon went vertical, flying straight up and hiding behind its own smoke trail. That self-same smoke trail hid it when the blonde dropped something.

Down through thick, oily smoke fell a crudely made bomb. At its core was the firing mechanism for a Dust-crossbow, rigged up to the unexploded payload of Adam Taurus's rocket-propelled grenade—which was itself ringed by the powdered Dust from four Dust-crossbow bolts.

Dust needed someone with an awakened Aura to trigger it. But it could be used to enhance a conventional explosive without any application of Aura at all. The firing mechanism went off,
setting off the grenade, which set off the Dust.

The resultant explosion was deafening even as high up as Jaune and Pyrrha managed to get before it went. Nearby ammo crates, as if in sympathy, touched off as the flames reached them. That set off more ammo and missiles—and then the chain reaction hit the Schnee Dust Company container.

And the mountain shook.

The shockwave caught up to Pyrrha and Jaune as well, the impact finally killing the hastily-constructed jetpack and hurling them sideways. A loud, shaky ascension quickly became a screaming, turbulent fall that arced out over the mountain, beyond the craggy foothills and toward the desert beyond.

Two screams were joined by the squeal of metal that was giving up the ghost. A brilliant orange flash accompanied a cloud of sand fountaining into the air, followed by another, then another until two badly battered bodies finally tumbled down the side of a sand dune, followed by a rain of scrap metal.

Pyrrha was tempted to imagine the last few weeks have been a terrible nightmare when she first came to. Then she considered it a miracle she was even alive. There was no way, even with her armor, that she could have lived through that fall. Being hit by the shockwave had almost depleted what she had left all on its own.

And if she couldn't have...

It hurt to sit up—the lingering injuries proving that her Aura was low to say the least—but she did, looking around for her employer. “Jaune?”

There was a groan below her and she found him lying at the foot of the dune, eyes fixed on something behind her. “I probably wouldn't have done that is I'd known they had a whole freaking truckload of Dust,” he muttered, frustrated.

Pyrrha followed his gaze, finding a plume of multi-colored smoke so tall it overtopped the mountain.

“At least that wiped out all the Arc Tech they had there.” Jaune groaned and screwed his eyes shut.

As much as she wanted to go down to him and see if he was okay, Pyrrha honestly hurt too much to move at all. Before she could even think of it, she found herself on her back again, staring at the sky. She didn't know how long she drifted off for, but eventually she heard the thrum of a Bullhead's engine and someone shouting.

Was that... Ruby?

Chapter End Notes

So ends the first -heh- arc of Arc Reaction. Moving away from the Iron Man movie here and we will diverge further as time goes on. This is a full fusion, so more RWBY elements will be coming in, including more Grimm and the fighting thereof.
Menagerie had been better off in recent years than it had been in its entire history. There were fewer slums, more business and jobs, the streets were cleaner and there were actually green spaces here and there. But the city's history as a ghetto where faunus had been forced to live apart from humans were written in its very architecture.

As clean and orderly as they were, the streets were all narrows, the buildings packed together so tightly that it was possible to leap from rooftop to rooftop with no help from Aura at all. In the summer, the heat had nowhere to go, making being outside stifling and uncomfortable.

Because historically they had been few faunus Hunters and even fewer human ones who wanted to help the city fend off the Grimm, Thier bst defenses had always been walls, constructed in concentric rings with the residential areas at the center, commercial districts further out, industrial sectors beyond that, and what little farmland Menagerie could muster lying just inside the final wall.

Said final wall was a behemoth, standing twenty stories tall and patrolled at all times by squads of city volunteers armed with outdated military hardware.

Except recently, those patrols were bolstered by hunters; some third and fourth year teams from Beacon, some mercenaries funded by various individuals who wanted to improve the region's safety, usually newly wealthy faunus who wanted to protect family and friends.

Azure Reinhold was a third year Beacon student and leader of team AGTE. She perched on the railing of the wall, splitting her attention between the Grimm prowling the scrubby hills down below and the workers bolting what looked like a mechanical version of a Deathstalker's stinger to the roof of the central guard tower of the eastern wall. Other such structures, built up on elevating pylons, were being installed on al Menagerie's towers and their presence made the young woman scowl.

“So that's the thing that's supposed to replace us, huh? Can those things go down in a cave and clear out Beowolf dens? Can they perform rescue missions? They're nothing but over-hyped bullshit is what they are.” Around her, her teammates nodded.

Greta Blanco had her hand on the hilt of her saber as she watched the hills. “If they take much longer, there will be real trouble. All the activity on the wall seems to have gotten unwanted attention. The Grimm are massing. Given the numbers I can see and the rate new ones are arriving, I estimate half an hours before they attempt to rush the wall.”
Thomas Ochre set his jaw. “We should get down there right now and destroy them all before they get the chance!”

“Something I hope you will all keep in mind, Mr. Ochre.” Team AGTE all turned and snapped to something that might generously be described as attention as their mentor walked up. They'd all been shocked and unbelievably excited when they arrived at the Beacon airship pads and found the Pyrrha Nikos waiting for them as the Huntress they would be shadowing for their summer away mission. That feeling hadn't faded in the past two weeks since they arrived.

Pyrrha nodded to them with a friendly smile as she stepped up to the railing next to Azure. “No matter how much of a thrill you get from it, regardless of whatever sense of accomplishment or satisfaction you gain, a Hunter's true purpose is not to fight Grimm.” Her green eyes scanned the roving monsters far below. “It's to protect people who can't protect themselves.

Secretly, she wished that drew the scoffs and teen-aged cynicism that sort of speech got when it came from any of the other Hunters mentoring students. But as usual, her students were too intimidated to mouth off and she highly suspected the staff at Beacon was purposefully not sending her the troublemakers.

That obviously didn't mean their silence was agreement though, so she turned to face all four of them and added, “But if you're really that set on a fight, I'll organize some sparring between you and Team FLME this evening after all this is said and done.”

A rude snort followed that and Pyrrha knew who it came from before even looking up: her least favorite person in Menagerie.

Four young men in their early twenties had come up the stairs from the city side of the wall. The obvious leader was a tall, broad man in silver armor with the stylized mark of a song bird across his chest. A massive iron mace swung from his hip. Cardin Winchester, former and still Team CRDL a rare Beacon student team that remained together as mercenaries after graduation.

Cardin wasn't even looking in Pyrrha's direction, but at the machine being installed. “As if they won't end up having to send us in when that thing sucks and fails.” He scratched his two days' worth of beard growth and rolled his eyes. “Honestly? I kind of wish that pile of junk did work. It'd mean we could finally blow this box of animal crackers and move on to someplace decent.”

The fourth and final member of Team AGTE, Eddard Braun, took a step forward, hand dropping to the handle of his ax and his wolf ears swiveling in their direction.

Pyrrha stopped the boy with a warding arm and moved to defend her charge herself. “No one is forcing you to be here, Cardin. If you hate faunus so much, why did you take a mission in the city with the highest concentration of them?”

Cardin let out another snort. “Same as you, I'm betting: the money. Ozpin himself put a bounty of five thousand lien a month for a tour of duty in this sty.” He swaggered over to a spot on the rail some distance from Pyrrha and her students and unhooked his mace so he could gesture with it. “Plus, everyone knows that they make the Grimm big and mean down here—even worse than in Atlas. And I love a challenge.”

Russell, Cardin's second in command, gave a laugh. “Yeah, I guess the beasties are good for something: they've got everything a growing Ursa needs to get big and strong.”

Now Eddard was very close to pushing past Pyrrha's arm, celebrity or no celebrity. She didn't give
him an inch or leeway. A third year versus a fully accredited graduate of a combat academy was not so much a fight as a savage beating.

“Grimm don't eat,” she said, her voice even but with an edge. “In fact, no one knows what sustained them or makes them grow and change. The only thing we really understand about them is that they are attracted to negative emotions.”

“Is this going to have a point, Nikos?” Cardin spat, idling swinging his mace.

Pyrrha ignored him and kept speaking. “I have a theory about why the Grimm congregate and grow strong around Menagerie. Imagine thousands of people driven from their homes to live packed together with little food and even less security. Imagine being cold and hungry and feeling alone in the world. All the hatred and all the oppression the people of this city suffered—that they still suffer; and the inevitable rage that must be bubbling just below the surface—none of that is their fault. If you ask me, the reason the Grimm here are so powerful has more to do with people like you than the residents of Menagerie.”

“Oh boo-hoo,” Cardin rolled his eyes, “If they wanted money, they should join the circus. Are we done here, because I want to get a good work out pounding Beowolves.”

It took a tremendous effort of will for Pyrrha not to use her Semblance to grab his armor and launch him into low orbit. Instead she grit her teeth and informed him, “We've been asked to hand back for now while the Arc Industries people test out their new defensive weapon. Didn't you read the dispatch?”

“Whatever. Even our bad asses can't kill all the Grimm down there in a day. There'll be enough for them.”

Azure, who had read the dispatch, was an eternal suck-up, and had learned from experience to hate Team CRDL like almost everyone else raised a hand. “I think the point is more that the thing they're installing? It fires a beam that's over three thousand degrees and will probably burn the hills to ash when they fire it.”

All Cardin offered in response to that was a grunt before turning to his team. “Whatever. Let's go boys.” with that, he threw one leg over the railing and dropped, one hand against the wall. The others followed suit, using an Aura manipulation to slide down the wall instead of plummeting to their deaths.

Resisting the urge to facepalm, Pyrrha looked to her students. “Would anyone care to tell me what we've learned from this?”

“Ooo! Ooo!” Thomas raised his hand. “Is it that assholes burn? Because that's how this seems to be shaping out to be.”

“Let's hope it doesn't quite come to that.” Leaning over the railing Pyrrha watched Team CRDL reach the bottom of the wall and charge off into a small pack of Beowolves that were lurking too close to the wall. “At least I hope not. Eddard, you look like you could use some exercise to burn off some energy, can you go warn the Arc Industries people they're down there?”

The wolf faunus knew exactly why he was being picked and nodded, breaking into a light jog toward where the workers were. There was a tall, black-haired woman that seemed to be in charge.

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“Alright, time to stop fidgeting and come out for your speech.” Cinder leaned on the door frame of
the top floor of the guard house, arms folded as she watched Jaune pace inside his impromptu green room.

“People are mad about this,” he was saying, possibly to her, possibly not. She remained cool and uncaring regardless. “People are really mad about this. Did you read some of this hate mail? I didn't know people still hated faunus this much. And who told them I was trying to replace Huntsmen?!”

Cinder rolled her eyes. “It is a fairly simple conclusion to jump to once they found out that you applied to and were rejected to all the major combat schools.”

Pressing the heels of his palms to his eyes, Jaune moaned, “Oh come on! This is gonna be a disaster!”

“A disaster you are officially running late for. I didn't invest in your little company to be a nursemaid, Jaune, I invested because you had something valuable to sell—now get out there and sell.”

Heaving a heavy sigh, Jaune pulled out his scroll and deleted his prepared speech. So much for that. “Okay... let's do this.” As if headed for the gallows, he trudged out past Cinder and out into daylight.

A grandstand had been constructed on the wall around the central guard tower and a modest crowd of locals had arrived to watch, alongside representatives of the Atlasian army. A group of Hunters —mostly students he'd been informed—stood at the rail, ready to leap into action just in case his new design pissed the Grimm off instead of destroying them.

Up on the stage, there were seats for the Mayor, Cinder (in her capacity as his business partner), and at Jaune’s own insistence, Velvet Scarletina, the senior Huntress at Menagerie who was currently on medical leave. She was in a wheelchair; the fact that an Aura-user had to use one at all a testament to the scope of her injury.

As he mounted the steps, Jaune could swear he head the roar of an Ursa, but wrote it off. They had been warned that gathering people up on the wall would attract more Grimm, but there weren't that many people in attendance that a lone Ursa might be tempted to make a run at the walls.

Stepping up the the podium, he corrected his assessment: there were that many people there. At least more than he felt comfortable speaking in front of. He looked to Cinder for help. Though snide and cold, she at least usually knew what to say. She just sat there, impassive. He was alone.

Time to just start talking and hope something not stupid came out.

“Um... hey folks...” He started and wished he had a do-over. “Uh... look: I know the sort of thing people are saying. They're wondering why I wanted to set up Helios here first. They want to know what effect this might have on the Hunters and whether I'm trying to replace them.

“Well the only answer I can give to both is... I'm just trying to help. I mean, I think we all know that you guys here in Menagerie have a pretty big Grimm problem. Like, literally big Grimm. And we can't ignore the fact that too many people are just not helping you guys because they have some dumb problem with faunus. I'm... you know.. not one of them. I don't care if you've got cat ears or a tail or antlers—porcupine quills? Is that like a thing? Because I've always wanted...”

He realized he'd gone off on a ramble and laughed nervously. “Nevermind. The point is, everyone deserves help when they need it and I figured you guys were tired of waiting, so here I am.”
There was a ripple of murmurs in the crowd. He had no idea if that was good or bad, but soldiered on. “As for Hunters... well I mean Hunters are people, right? That's kind of a problem when you're sending them out to fight because if you lose them, you lose a person—someone's friend or sibling or love. A-and the weapons—though admittedly cool—well Dust isn't a renewable resource. Eventually we might run out, so it's a good idea to work on alternative now. But back to the people.”

He gestured behind him. “This is Velvet. A lot of them probably know her because she'd from Menagerie. I got to talk to her a little bit when we first arrived and—well you all probably know the story: she got hurt last week. A Giant Nevermore picked her up and dropped her into a pack of Beowolves. Even with her Aura, she's going to be in recovery for another few weeks. And she's already told me that if Helios doesn't work, she's going to be back on this wall the second she's better, ready to defend you all from them Grimm even if it's with her life.”

His nerves started to loosen up as his passion mounted. Instead of getting louder though, his voice grew soft. “I-I don't want that to happen. Maybe it's because eI believed too deeply in the old fairy tales: the Four Maidens, the Knight who put the Dragon of the Stars to Sleep... things like that, but I want Velvet to get a happy ending. I want us all to get a happy ending.

“Helios is my attempt to start us on the path to that happy ending. Today, I'm going---”

He cut off because he was sure he heard something roar. Something big. Followed by someone far off on the wrong side of the wall shouting, and then by a collective gasp from the Hunters on the wall.

He turned and looked past the ever-impassive Cinder to scan the hills below. After a short search, he caught sight of movement on an outcropping along one of the hillocks. No, actually, its was the outcropping itself. It was rising up, dirt cracking and trialing off it as it revealed itself ot have pincers and a scorpion tail—a Deathstalker was emerging from hiding to attack prey.

It took another second for him to spot the prey if only because of how tiny they were in comparison: four armored figures were alternately trying to avoid it and engage it in combat. Avoidance was taking precedence, and a moment later, it became full retreat as the Deathstalker's pincer nimbly darted in and caught one of the figures—one in silver armor—by the arm and lifted them off the ground.

“Those idiots!” he heard someone say from the Hunter group.

Jaune wasn't paying much attention to what was going on there. From his vantage point, he could see that the violence and panic had attracted two full packs of Beowolves which were making use of the hills to converge on the fleeing Hunters unseen. He swiftly pulled out his scroll and connected to the local Arc Industries control network.

He types in his correct overrides and granted himself voice control within seconds. “Bring Unit Prima online now. Skip boot-up routines and set to manual control in burst mode.”

The massive device so recently installed atop the guard tower sprang to life. Hydraulics raised the 'stinger' while the business ends split open into four sections, revealing a swirl of brilliant plasma. A camera view from the top of the weapon popped up on Jaune's scroll, a targeting reticule appearing at the center.

This was not the demonstration he'd been hoping for, but there was nothing for it.

Dragging his finger across the screen, Jaune targeted the Deathstalker first, setting the crosshairs
on its center mass. “Fire,” he ordered. The plasma in the Helios unit brightened for a moment before being disgorged in a single mass, a new star that streaked over the hills in an unerring path toward the gigantic scorpion.

The Grimm never saw it coming. The plasma burst tore into it, striking just behind the head and burning away whatever it touched. In one last act of spite before perishing, the hulking beast snapped its pincer closed over its captive’s arm.

The resultant scream could be heard from the wall, and everyone there could see the injured hunter falling heavily to the grassy ground clutching at the mutilated nub of his arm. His aura, a fiery orange, tried in vain to repair the damage, sending sparks fountaining into the air through his fingers.

His agony wasn’t only noticed by the people on the falls. No, such a sharp spike of suffering caused the beowolves to draw up short, their eldritch sense. The fleeing men were forgotten as they zeroed in on a far more tempting target.

“Shit.” Jaune muttered. “Bring the others online. Segunda, Trika, Tetra, Penta. Boot-up and set to active defense.” He looked around, hoping someone else could arrange getting the injured Huntsman back; nothing in the Arc Industries bag of tricks could manage that.

Down the wall, where the other Hunters had assembled, he spotted a Huntress spinning her weapon—a spear—into a rifle and taking aim at the Beowolves. As she started shooting, the quartet of younger Hunters looked to one another. It appeared none of them had anything with enough range.

Jaune knew someone with enough range, though he’d only seen Cinder pull out the bow twice in his entire time knowing her; but when Grimm got too close to a test site and her person was threatened. Whether she was a former Hunter or not was up for debate, but as he watched her now out of the corner of his eye, it was clear she had no interest in helping now.

Out of options, he beseeched the crowd. “Please! Can someone go get him? I can't fire near him because the plasma could brun him to death!” Firing on the Deathstalker hadn't been an issue because it was so big, but the pack of Beowolves was a different story.

From the ranks of the Atlasians, someone jumped up so as to make themselves seen. Wearing a red dress, cape and hood instead of the standard military marked her as part of the Expeditionary Forces: Hunters Atlas deployed as scouts and advance forces after Grimm incursions.

“Ooo! Ooo!” She squealed, pushing her way through the troops. Jaune caught General Ironwood frowning his face out of the corner of his eye. At last, the young woman in red won free, revealing to Jaune that she was young—probably still a teenager.

“On it!” She flashed Jaune a huge grin, then dashed for the railing in a flurry of... were those rose petals? As she ran, she reached behind her and drew out a device Jaune couldn’t name. It unfolded into a monstrous scythe and, just as she leapt over the rail, it let out the unmistakable crack of a gunshot. The recoil accelerated the young Hunter even further out into space where she performed a superfluous flip before firing again, rocketing straight for the downed man.

All the while, the spear-wielder kept up a steady patter of fire, downing Beowolves one after another. Almost a full pack of them were down and dissolving into smoke by the time the red-hooded woman hit the ground. But blood was proverbially already in the water and at least five packs were pinging the motion sensors Arc Industries had seeded the hills with. Five packs of Beowolves along with a dozen or more ursai and three times as many smaller Grimm.
Jaune watched the red streak make its way toward the downed man while also keeping tabs on the boot-up sequences of the other Helios weapons. They were all ready and standing by.

“Begin acquiring targets and prioritizing based on threat assessment and civilian safety. Hold fire until my mark,” he ordered the computer. Targeting reticules started to pop up all over his display.

By then, the crowd had all cottoned to the seriousness of the situation and pressed forward to watch what was going on.

The red Huntress dodged as two Beowolves lunged for her, swinging her scythe up to catch one around the neck as she went by. The Blade caught into the beast's throat and the momentum flung the young woman around to kick the second creature in the face. As that one reared back, she brought her scythe around the cut it in two. Then she took off running for the injured man again.

A minor Grimm, something resembling a two-legged lizard the size of a large dog sprang out at her only to have its skull pierced by a bullet from the spear-wielder. The Huntress barely even paid it any mind as she skidded to a halt next to the one she was meant to save.

Everyone was leaning forward as she hauled him onto her shoulders and took off again, giving a Beowolf a mouthful of petals for its trouble.

The scythe fired twice more, the recoil adding to the red Huntress's already amazing speed, but the problem now was that she had ever Grimm within a five mile radius of Menagerie chasing after her. While everyone else on the wall was watching with baited breath, Jaune had his focus fixed on his Scroll, which was showing the minimum safe distance she had to clear to avoid being burned by the Helios weapons.

“Out of ammo!” he heard a female voice call, but he couldn't be bothered to look up. If he wanted the two down there to survive, he needed to give the order just as... he was shocked by just how fast the red-hooded stranger could move.

“Helios. Active defense mode. All fire. Continual stream.” He didn't know it, but he was shouting the command at the top of his lungs.

All five Helios weapons opened up and poured out undulating streams of golden light; a brilliant curtain that swept down upon the hills outside Menagerie, setting the foliage aflame and advancing like the blade of a holy sword into the charging horde of Grimm.

A huge ursa was the first to taste the rays of Helios, charging headlong in its pursuit of the injured and afraid. It ran directly into the beam, becoming a silhouette that immediately disintegrated. Unholy shrieks went up as more and more Grimm were caught in the deadly wave and annihilated.

And then there was silence.

For the first time—possibly in the history of the world—the hills outside Menagerie were silent and free of the darkness.

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“Murgh.” Jaune said eloquently as he awakened. He remembered military doctors poking and prodding him, a dazed walk through some concrete bunker of a building, shedding dirty and shredded clothes and being herded onto a Bullhead while trying to register his complaints.

Then in a rush, he remembered the head-first crash into a sand dune, the explosive escape, the deadly battle in the caves—Doctor Yinsen. And then he remembered how he got to know the good
doctor: helping him during the surgery. The pakcbuster bomb.

His eyes flew open and Pyrrha's name was on his lips. Although it sounded more like, “Peewha” through his dry mouth and cracked lips.

“Hmm?”

The world suddenly resolved. The side-by-side rows of troop seating common to all military Bullheads. He was strapped in tightly and from the sound of it, Pyrrha was nearby, possibly half asleep. His vision slowly resolved the red blur across from them just as his stomach realized they were in the air and started to rebel.

His oldest friend and the military liason to Arc Industries ever since the day of the Helios test, Ruby Rose sat across from them, staring as if she was watching newborn puppies play. And in mockery of Jaune's poor, empty, heaving stomach, she was eating from a bag of chocolate cookies by the fist full.

When she noticed him looking at her, she gave him a big, chocolatey grin and waved enthusiastically. “Hiya, Jaune! Bet you won't complain so much about the Bullhead after your last humvee ride, huh?”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was the buffer between story arcs showing a bit more about how the AU works. Effectively, the difference is the Jaune never tried to get into Beacon and Nora was, well, Thor and thus wasn't on Remnant at that point. So there was a Team RWBY, and there was a Team CRDL, but there wasn't a Team JNPR. In case you're wondering, the team with Ren and Pyrrha was Team PERL—and their partners will not be important, though we will explore how that team's dynamics worked.

Also part of the AU, Cinder obviously had a different tact here, but her goals (as far as I can speculate since the show is ongoing) remains the same. The current time is roughly 9 years after the first year of beacon, so Jaune and Pyrrha are 26, Ruby is 24, etc.
After some time for both Jaune and Pyrrha to fully wake up and for Ruby to explain that she'd taken advantage of Jaune's diminished capacity earlier to dose him with motion sickness pills to avoid as much unpleasantness as possible, it came time to tell the tale of the missing three weeks.

Jaune ended up telling most of it as Pyrrha had been in and out of consciousness for almost a third of that and by the time they caught up to the part she remembered, he was in full storyteller mode. While Ruby was predictably enamored with the idea of being locked in a cave with a ton of weapons and ordered to tinker, that was tempered by talk of coercion and near-death.

But her self-control ended when Jaune described the Arc Reactor.

“Ooo! New tech! Is that the big thing you have at the main labs? Because that thing is awesome! I never would have expected something to be that cool without using Dust, but that thing is crazy cool—almost as cool as that space camera thing you made that watches Grimm movement patterns and is powered by the sun!”

The barrage of words, fueled in no small part by her sugar rush from all those cookies, kept the two former captives stunned while she unbuckled herself. “And you made a tiny one and put it in Pyrrha's chest? I mean, Yang would have all kinds of jokes about that, but I'm just so excited, let me see!”

And in a swirl of rose petals, she crossed the space between the two rows of seats and was yanking the neck of Pyrrha's military issued sweatshirt down to get a look at the hardware. Which, thanks to the placement of said device, in turn offered a look at the Huntress-turned-assistant's other, more natural 'hardware'.

Pyrrha gave a surprised squeak and tried to pry Ruby while Jaune made a strangled sound and averted his eyes.

“Rubes! Mixed company! Also bad touch.” he said, trying to become very interested in a random bulkhead.

“Yes. This is neither the time nor the place, Ruby.” Pyrrha managed to overpower the younger girl almost as soon as she overcame her initial mortification. Slowly, she forced Ruby's hands down to her sides. “I promise to let you look at it later.”

Ruby stopped struggling and backed up a few steps with a sheepish look, index fingers poking together in her usual nervous tic. “Sorry. I just got a little excited. He's been working on miniaturizing that thing for ages.”

“Believe me, I know how impressive it is,” Pyrrha pulled her shirt back up, frowning at how badly Ruby had stretched the neck out. It was amazing how strong Ruby was when she was determined. Once she made sure she was decent again, she patted Jaune on the shoulder. “It's safe to look now.”

“You didn't have to put it like that.” Jaune said petulantly. “It's not like I'm scared of them or something.”
“I’m sorry,” Pyrrha said, though the amused smirk on her face told a different story.

Jaune scowled and turned his attention back to Ruby. “Okay, changing the subject now. So anyway, if you think the Arc Reactor's cool, wait 'til you hear what we powered with it. See after that Taurus guy and his lieutenant... what was her name Pyr?”

“Blake,” Pyrrha all but spat, “I'll never forget that name or that face. Taurus is a fanatic, but she was cold; dispassionate. Like she was doing everything without even believing in their cause. That's something far more dangerous than a simple madman.”

The sound Ruby made was something between a gasp and a squeak. “Wait. You were being held by Adam Taurus? The leader of the White Fang?”

Having been about to launch into the description of the powered armor, Jaune faltered. “Y-yes?”

“A-and he was with a person named Blake?”

Both Jaune and Pyrrha nodded.

There was a tremble in Ruby's voice as she pressed on. “Was she a... cat faunus?”

At this, Pyrrha narrowed her eyes. “Ruby? Have you run into her before?”

“You don't remember her? From Beacon?”

Pyrrha's eyes dropped to her hands, resting folded in her lap. “I honestly only remember you from Beacon because Professor Ozpin held those meetings for team leaders.” She gave a rueful chuckle, “My father told me that I was not at Beacon to make friends—and I didn't. Even my team was only such because there was no alternative. We were cold and efficient and only there to train and win.”

After a moment of trying to decide how to respond, Ruby decided to leave that one alone and distract Pyrrha from her lonely memories. “Well... Blake was the 'B' on Team RWBY; Yang's partner.”

Jaune goggled. “You were on a team with the crazy terrorist girl?!”

“Well she was an ex-crazy terrorist girl when we knew her. Only not really. I mean she was never a terrorist... for long. She left the White Fang because they had turned to violence and stuff.”

“Tell that to Pyrrha's jugular the got real close to that sword of hers!” Jaune fumed.

At this sudden change of character, Ruby shied back defensively. “I don't know what happened! After graduation, Weiss convinced us all the come back to Atlas and work with her, but Weiss's dad is...”

“...Like the worst guy ever?” Jaune supplied.

“Yeah, that sums it up.” Ruby agreed and Pyrrha nodded. “I don't think he likes anyone, but he really, really doesn't like faunus. Blake was touchy enough about that kind of stuff in the first place, but she was hiding the fact and... well Mr. Schnee was pretty free with what he thinks are jokes....”

Ruby's eyes brimmed at the memory. “Blake finally yelled at him, so then she and Weiss had a fight, then Weiss and Yang had a fight, then Blake and Yang had a fight because Blake said it wasn't Yang's fight and Yang thinks everything its her fight and the next morning Blake was gone.
No note, no nothing.”

There followed an uncomfortable silence before Jaune asked, “Do you think that's what convinced her to get back with the White Fang?”

“It was enough to break up our team,” Ruby said sadly. “Yang's been looking for her. The past four years, she's been searching. I don't know if she wants to convince her to partner up again, or to beat her up for ditching us. And Weiss won't even mention her name.”

Taking a deep breath, she changed her demeanor mid spiel. “But never mind that. I've got calls to make when we land, but let's talk about how you escaped—and how you blew up their camp; the General wants to know more about that.

Jaune and Pyrrha exchanged glances. Now that Ruby mentioned the explosion, it was a hard reminder of how many members of the White Fang died to make good their escape—one of whom was apparently a friend of Ruby's. Without saying a word, they agreed not to bring up that likelihood with Ruby.

Instead, Jaune launched into his explanation of the powered armor, instantly distracting and engrossing her.

After they finished recounting their escape and answering all of Ruby's questions, there was still half an hour's flight back to Vale's landing pads.

“Hey Rubes?” Jaune asked, starting to feel the medication wearing off, “Do you mind using your scroll to call us a car?”

“Sure.” Ruby had returned to her seat and finished off that bag of cookies, “Where to? I'd recommend a hospital, Aura or no Aura, but both of you are too hard-headed for that. So... restaurant to celebrate? Night club because Jaune's gone almost a month without a drink thrown in his face—”

“Oh come on!”

“--press conference to let your employees know Cinder won't be in charge after all. Speaking of which: please never leave again. I had like four meetings with her since you disappeared. She scares me.”

Jaune gave her a sympathetic look, “She scares everyone, Rubes. No shame in admitting that.”

“Even I would say she's one of the most intimidating people I've ever met,” Pyrrha added.

“So... where to again?” Ruby asked to mask the awkwardness of them all being at least a little afraid of a venture capitalist.

“Restaurant is tempting,” said Jaune. “It'd be nice to get a cheeseburger—like a real Valean cheeseburger. But I think we're both feeling more like going straight home, catching a shower.... then sleeping approximately forever. That sound good to you, Pyr?”

“That sounds divine.”

Jaune nodded to Ruby. “So yeah, we're gonna do that.”

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It was well past sundown when the car service dropped Jaune and Pyrrha off at the Arc Compound. It wasn't hard for the driver to find: just the only private residence located outside the city and with its own array of Arc Industries defensive emplacements.

Their weariness dragged at them as Jaune unlocked the front door. “Ladies first.” He sketched a shallow bow while stepping aside for her.

“Welcome home, sir, Miss Nikos.” Glynda’s dry voice “You have eight hundred twenty-three messages waiting. Four deliveries have been returned to the Vale Post Office and are awaiting retrieval.”

“They’ll have to wait til tomorrow, Glyn. I think we're both headed to our rooms for the night. Can you run the hot water to my shower, please?”

Pyrrha raised her hand. “Mine too please.” Then a concerned expression crossed her face and she touched the Arc Reactor through her shirt. “Is it okay to shower with this?”

Jaune cocked his head in thought. “Um... well it's waterproof on the internal side, but on the outside.... I-I'm not sure. Look, maybe you should stick to a spnge bath for tonight. I'll get to work on making a more permanent replacement as soon as you're out of the shower.”

With her hand still over the reactor, Pyrrha frowned. “Jaune, you need to get some rest. I'll be fine for a few days like this. Once we're both feeling better, we can work on this fresh and do out best...” she hesitated before adding, “Together.”

Pursing his lips, Jaune faltered. He didn't want her to go any longer with the slapdash prototype than she had too, but she had a point: if he worked while fatigued, the result wouldn't be anywhere near as good as it could be. That wasn't acceptable to him when Pyrrha's health was involved.

He scrubbed his hands through his hair. “Y-yeah. You're right.” Then he put on a tried smile. “You're off duty, Miss Nikos. Take the next couple of days off, okay?”

“Okay,” she said and turned to head for her room. Her room. A thought piqued her curiosity: Jaune had said they were going home when talking to Ruby and then referred to them as 'our rooms' instead of 'my room and the guest room'. “Jaune?” she asked experimentally.

“Hmm?”

“Thanks for letting me stay over.”

Jaune blinked. “Staying over? Pyrrha, I don't know why you haven't been going home for the past while, but I want you to know that this place is your home as much as mine... you know if you want. I gave you full admin rights with Glynda like a month ago—two months now I guess.”

How had she not noticed that? “Thank you,” she tried to keep excess emotion out of her voice and failed. “Um, see you in the morning?”

“See you in the morning.”

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Although she said she was going to clean up and go to bed and fully intended to, Pyrrha found that although she was certainly weary, she wasn't tired. There were too many thoughts ticking along in her mind, first and foremost, Jaune's little proclamaiton that his home was hers now. Pyrrha felt a warmth in her chest at the revelation. In the cave, they'd both confessed that they were closer than
just a boss and employee, but that had been clear for a long time. It felt like another step up from that to find out that notoriously nervous and cautious Jaune Arc had given her total access to his home. But it wasn't completely surprising either, just... nice.

Seeing as her Scroll was somewhere likely smashed or exploded in Vacuo, she went down to the lab and got out on of Jaune's design internet-capable tablets and brought it up to the living room.

Not long after she'd made herself comfortable on the big, white, plush couch, Jaune made an appearance. She imagined he was seeing a whole new side to her now: normally, she was up well before him and dressed for a day of work. Tonight, she was still wearing the loose, stretched army sweatshirt, a set of equally loose pajama pants, and had her hair out of its ponytail, just a red mass cascading down her back.

Clearly, he did notice something, because she could practically feel his emotions shift as his eyes roved over her on reflex and he caught himself doing it. With an audible gulp he focused on the tablet in her hand. “I...uh... thought you were off duty.”

That was another thing that didn't surprise her, but still managed to inevitably stir up an emotional response in her. This time it wasn't so happy. For whatever reason, he could saunter up to any women he didn't know, waggle his eyebrows, leer like someone in a park wearing a trench coat and nothing else, and drop pick-up lines a drunk high schooler would be ashamed of—and yet if he caught himself even checking her out, he acted like he was committing a mortal sin.

She might not have minded if the only other woman he shied away from flirting with was Cinder. Anything that made her feel like she was in the same category as Cinder in any way made her itch all over to start. For Jaune to the the one doing it made it worse no matter what the actual reason was.

Fighting back a wince, she shrugged. “I wasn't doing any work really; just trying to see what's been going on these past three weeks.”

“Uh-huh,” Jaune said, clearly not believing her. “And how much of this news you've been catching up on involved Arc Industries.”

She played guilty even if she was feeling anything but. “Just one. Cinder apparently started those negotiations to take over the full security contract for the city of Vale proper. It would make things more secure, putting everything on the Arc Network. It'd also make it easier for you to convert everything to run off Arc Reactors once you go into full production.”

Jaune shook his head and cross the pristine, white living room carpet to the faux fireplace and the mantle around it. His gaze fixed on the cross sword and shield that held the place of honor there: the Arc Family Blade: Crocea Mors. “No. No, we're not letting anyone outside this family know about the miniaturized reactor just yet.”

That brought Pyrrha up short and she stared at the back of his head. “W-what? Why?”

He was silent for a time. From the angled of his head, Pyrrha knew he was looking at the plaque resting in front of Crocea Mors; the Creed of Kings—the Arc family motto. She'd read it before several times. It handily explained everything the drove her employer and friend—and everything that ruined him.

I am a child of House Arc.
The Blood of Kings and Queens roars in these veins.
By the jaundiced edge of this blade, we hewed a Kingdom from the Darkness
I stand. I live to push that Darkness back.
I stand. I live as a Guardian of Mankind.
Those behind my Aegis will never perish from this world.
Such is the Word of House Arc.
Such is the Will of the Dust and Remnant.

“It'd just be making the same mistake again,” he whispered. A little louder, he asked, “I'm not doing enough, Pyrrha. That or I'm not doing it right—or both.” He pressed on, not giving her time to argue with him. “I've spent years making weapons to kill soulless monsters, but I never stopped and considered that those weapons don't care if what they're killing are monsters or not. They. Just. Kill. And they're out there, killing people. I never thought about it before, but I bet it isn't just the White Fang—it's probably not even just people getting their hands on this stuff under the table.

“Ironwood certainly wouldn't hold back on dropping a Jericho on a White Fang based if he thought it could let him win. A-and I get it: sometimes in war or in a life-or-death situation like we were in, you don't have a choice but to kill.” He clenched his jaw as his frustration and guilt mounted. “I know that I killed those men down in those caves because if I didn't...” A sob tried to run up his throat, but he choked it back. “Because if I didn't, they would have killed you. Rewind it back, give me a choice, I'd do it all over again.

“But it feels awful. Not just those either. I wasn't even there, but I helped kill Doctor Yinsen's family in Gulmira just as surely as I put that shrapnel in your chest. I made it possible because no one was doing the things I do until I started. Now there's the Schnees and Torchwick—I can't believe that guy managed to 'go legit' selling knock-offs of my weapons. And I knew all of this, Pyrrha and I didn't bother to do anything about it!”

Pounding a fist against the mantle piece, he turned fully away from her so she wouldn't see tears. “And you know the worst part? The White Fang shouldn't even exist. Not like they used to be; certainly not now. They aren't some nuts: they're people that got pushed to the edge. Look what happened to the Blake woman? And maybe that's not my fault, but what have I been doing to help? Yeah, I set up Helios and hired Velvet, but I have no idea how the rest of the company does business. I've just been happy being the inventor—the cash cow like Cinder keeps calling me. Maybe that reporter is right—maybe I'm no better than Schnee. I wouldn't know the difference.”

He wasn't surprised when he felt a hand fall on his shoulder. But it was comforting. Then Pyrrha surprised him as the hand slid down over his shoulder, was joined by a second and he suddenly found his assistant, bodyguard and best friend hugging him tightly from behind.

“Oh Jaune,” she said softly in his ear. “Do you know the difference between you and Schnee or Ironwood or Torchwick?” He shook his head. “It's the fact that you ask those questions. Not only do you ask, but I have total faith that you're going to do your best to do something about it?”

Jaune lowered his head. “Am I? I mean we need to fight the Grimm. And yeah, Helios can't be easily moved, but I'd hate to stop our ability to open up new territory by stopping the other manufacturing arms. I guess there was a reason no one ever did what I did before: Hunters are easier to hold responsible. Unfortunately, we'd need thousands of more Hunters to replace all those weapons.”

“Hmm.” Pyrrha's hum vibrated down his spine, reminding him she was still holding him. At some point he'd just relaxed into her grip. “Do we need more Hunters... or stronger Hunters? Hunters with better weapons of their own? Better defenses?”

Jaune frowned. “Well yeah, but you can't just make people more...” His eyes widened as he realized what she was talking about. “Ooooh.”
He started to turn and Pyrrha released him so he could do so, though they ended up standing extremely close to one another. “Well, I mean... Yeah. That could work. We only give it out to people we can trust. But we'd need more design stages, more testing—live testing against Grimm and... others if it comes down to that. And that means less-lethal armaments.” He hesitated, then met her eyes. “Are... you up to it?”

She met his gaze, held it for the space of a breath, then said, “No.”

“Huh?”

“Not alone,” she said before he could freak out. If I’ve learned anything from my time stationed at Menagerie, Hunters work better in pairs at the very least.” A shy smile graced her lips. “I'd need a partner.”

“I guess I can call Ruby--”

“I mean you, Jaune.” Before the words were even out of her mouth, Pyrrha had a finger to his lips to keep him from objecting. “We both know it was your dream to be a Hunter. Can you honestly say that dream is dead? With the armor and more than casual training, there's no reason you couldn't pull it off now.”

He couldn't argue, so when she removed her finger, he didn't. “So... we're going to do this? Some kind of elite Hunter team in powered armor?”

“I don't see why not.” She answered with a bright smile. The more they talked about it, the more she was anticipating not only the action, but the work they'd be putting into bringing it to fruition.

“We'll have to keep it secret to start with. Ironwood might bring the whole military down on us if he finds out we have a weapon we're not selling to him.”

“That should be simple enough—though sadly, I think that means no telling Ruby.”

Jaune nodded. “It's bad enough we're going to have to tell her to hide the new Arc Reactor from him. Oh! And we absolutely cannot tell Cinder. Legally, she'd be entitled to try and compel me to market this stuff if I use any company materials in the development.”

“Honestly? I would be so much more comfortable if she knows nothing about this at all.”

So we're really doing this? This is happening?” Jaune asked.

Pyrrha grinned. “This is really happening.”

Then Jaune paused. “Wait... but what does this do about faunus and the White Fang?”

At this, his assistant spread her hands. “You do remember you're still in charge of your company, right, Jaune? Take some of that control and make some changes for the better.”

He nodded, brimming with new-found confidence. “Then tomorrow, we do a press conference. I think I have just the changes in mind.”

Chapter End Notes
So there's the impetus for them to turn to Superheroics. It sort of riffs on the movie's 'pilot's instinct without the plane' thing, but also validates the existence of Huntsmen. War is far worse on Remnant than on Earth because negative emotions would bring Grimm running on top of everything else, so no one even imagined inventing something to make war larger scale than cavalry charges and individual combats. Jaune unknowingly leapfrogged the world from trench fighting to guided missiles because he only thought about targeting Grimm.

You might notice I don't deal too much with blushes or angst here because the characters are a bit more mature here than high school students. Of course, that doesn't mean I'm not immature enough to make a joke about RDJ's many, many shirtless scenes in Iron Man to show off the Arc Reactor and how that totally would not fly it it was Iron Woman. Don't worry, it's the last joke like that in the fic.

The Arc family motto is kind of important foreshadowing. Parts of it mean something very different than what it seems.

As for my portrayal of their relationship here: yeah, they're pretty intimate despite not dating. I have friendships like that, so I don't find it weird. People can be friends and be very close. That these particular two hold deeper attractions doesn't change that except for where they might end up.
Halfway across the world in Vacuo, the sun had set long ago. The Atlasian military had finally finished their operations in the area following the massive search party General Ironwood mobilized to locate his primary weapons contractor. They'd only managed to pack up and leave sixteen hours earlier.

As soon as she'd heard the Atlasians were bugging out, a certain venture capitalist, her administrative assistant, and bodyguard had chartered the fastest, most surreptitious airship they could (a knockoff Schnee design courtesy of Roman's LTD—because even though he was now legit, Roman Torchwick never forgot his shady roots and cheerfully offered many services that could only be bought with cash lien and involved no paperwork at all).

Ironically for a world infested with creatures of Darkness, night was never pitch black on Remnant; the sun was always able to reflect off at least a few shattered pieces no matter what time of month it was.

It was still dark enough, however, to contrast well with the high beams stabbing through the night from the front of two all-terrain vehicles.

In the lead was Cinder Fall. Her hair was pulled back into a bun and stuffed into her helmet while her clothing was appropriate for night on a Vacuan mountain: Rugged hiking boots, BDU’s, and a black turtleneck under a long, black wool jacket.

Behind her rode her two—well she didn't think of them as friends or associates—minions: Mercury Black and Emerald Suturai. Emerald, a woman with mint green hair, was dressed much the same as Cinder, though she eschewed a helmet in favor of just a pair of goggles, was driving with Mercury forced to hold on to her or fall off, much to his displeasure.

Mercury was not dressed for the climate, sporting a tight athletic suit in black and gray with three-quarter sleeves. His boots were extremely durable combat boots with a carousel style ammunition magazine visible around the ankles.

“When we head back, we're switching sides. I don't even care that you'll pick my pocket anymore, this is demeaning.”

Emerald dutifully ignored him and drove up alongside Cinder. “Not that I'm questioning you,” she remembered what Cinder did to them when she felt she was being doubted and didn't feel much like hanging around watching her aura heal bruises, “but do you mind if I ask why we're out here when Arc just got back? I would imagine you might want to do something about that.”

Being too focused on the road to properly injure her minion for showing even a glimmer of insubordination, Cinder chose honor Emerald with an actual answer. “Believe it or not, Jaune Arc is not the end-all and be-all of our plans. Though I suppose we have him to thank for choosing this mountain in particular to test his new wonderful killing machine.”

All around them, the mountainside was blackened and charred. The Grimm corpses had long since sublimed into the ether, leaving only the shattered and burnt remains of foliage and boulders.

Cinder stared straight ahead, eyes locked on the faint, green glow at the end of their journey.
“Neither of you have been worthy of experiencing the things I've been shown, so I will explain: Myth, Legend, Fairy Tales? The all have to come from somewhere, whether actual history distorted by time to something more symbolic. And sometimes, they're prophetic.”

As she spoke, they rolled to a stop along a ridge where the ground had cracked open, allowing sickly green light to emerge.

She gave the disbelieving faces of her minions a smirk as she dismounted her ride and removed her helmet. “For example: long ago, a great dragon fell from the stars in a metal egg. Within his egg, he guarded great treasures and destroyed all who came too close.”

Still speaking, she sauntered over to the crack in the earth. It was only as wide as her two palms put together with cracks spreading out from it. “One day, however, a wagon train of refugees, fleeing from a war-torn land happened into his territory. The dragon emerged from his egg and confronted them, swearing he would annihilate them.”

Taking one giant step back, she gestured to Mercury, then to the crack in the ground. Grumbling a bit to himself, the hired muscle of Cinder's group made his way to the breech and stomped, firing the weapon concealed in his boot at the same time. The crack widened, but nowhere near enough to grant entrance, so Mercury continued attacking the rock.

Cinder went on with her tail, ignoring Mercury's efforts in favor of speaking in Emerald's direction. “But among the refugees' numbers was a knight who turned his back on his lord in order to protect those very people. He issued a challenge to the dragon to fight in single combat. In its arrogance, the dragon accepted, only to find that this knight was a formidable foe.”

By then, Mercury was cursing as rock shards flew up from his boots to slash at his arms, chest and face. Still, he kept going, widening the opening. And still Cinder ignored him.

“They fought for seven days and seven nights. Their battle flattened the surrounding plains and the poisoned blood of the dragon created the Vacuo badlands. They fought their way up the mountain and into the egg itself. By then, they were both exhausted and the knight felt his life bleeding away. In the end, the dragon was so worn out by the battle that it fell into a deep slumber. The knight, however, was so weakened and near death, that he couldn't strike the killing blow. Instead, he caused the mountain to swallow the egg so that no one could ever wake the dragon again.”

Emerald cocked her head and scowled. “That was stupid. He had a whole slew of people he could have asked to finish the thing off, but instead he just seals it away so it can be someone else's problem?”

“Heroes are never the brightest of people. I like to imagine the real reason he didn't kill the dragon was because he didn't think it was 'honorable' or some idiotic thing like that.” She looked over her shoulder. “How's it coming, Mercury?”

The silver-haired man was breathing hard and standing beside a person-sized hole. Huffing, he leaned over, hands on knees and looked up at her. “Am I really going to have to smash open enough space for a dragon to come out?”

Cinder made a show of thinking about it just to get his anxiety up, then shook her head. “That would be completely unnecessary.: if the Star Dragon ever wakes up, he wouldn't have any problems smashing his way out now that his prison's been breached.”

She went to the back of her ATV and retrieved a satchel, climbing rope and pitons from the cargo netting there. When she looked up, she suppressed another smirk to see the concerned expressions
on the pair's faces. “Oh. Don't worry: I'm not here to wake the Star Dragon. I'm here for his treasures.”

It took two hours of work, but Mercury and Emerald managed to rig Cinder's climbing gear and get her down to the interior of the dragon's prison and back up again. Their leader emerged with a bulging satchel over her shoulder and a long, narrow box of black metal clutched in one hand.

Her fear of the dragon awakening temporarily overridden by avarice, Emerald let out a low whistle at the sheer amount of things she surmised to be in the satchel. “That's quite a haul; we might be able to buy some other moron's company with all that.”

Cinder gave her a disturbingly predatory grin. “Oh these?” She shrugged the shoulder carrying the satchel. “These are party favors we can pass out as needed. You know for distractions, bribes or general purposes heretofore unforeseen. The real treasures are right here.” Extending the box into Emerald's view, she flipped the box open to reveal ten rings laid out on silk lining.

The predatory grin grew larger. “Believe me: the day I find an excuse to put these to use? That will be the day we've been waiting for.”

RWBYRWBYRWBY

On another mountain, on the other side of the world in Shade, the sun was still an hour or two from setting as Agents Sun Wukong and Neptune Vasilias watched a Bullhead painted with forest camo come in for a landing along a wooded ridge just a few hundred feet below the treeline.

It wasn't hard to tell something weird was going on in this place: the sun shone brightly everywhere except for one area localized to about a third of the way up the mountain where a rolling thunderhead pounded a sizable area with rain and periodic lightning bolts.

Sun kept one eye on the thunderstorm and the other on the newly-arrived Bullhead before turning to Neptune. “I'm not sure which I'm more worried about: the crazy crap going on up there, or the fact that they sent in the psychopath to help us deal with it.”

“I think you're thinking of the word 'sociopath'”

At the intrusion of the sudden voice beside him drew a girlish scream from Sun who would have leapt into Neptune's arms if not for the fact this his partner hadn't dodged out of the way, leaving the blonde monkey faunus to crash to the ground.

Biting back a curse, Sun looked up to find a man his age dressed in a simple charcoal colored suit that could have come off the rack of any store. Dark hair was allowed to partially obscure the newcomer's face while the rest of it was pulled back into a thin tail. He gave them impassive looks. Sun didn't doubt he was judging them.

Lie Ren noted that both his fellow agents were dressed casually, with Sun wearing his shirt open to the waist in the Vacuo style and Neptune having his blue hair spiked up with more gel than all the hair dressers of Vale could supply in a week. Suddenly the suit felt like a bit much.

“If I were a sociopath, I would probably make some subtle innuendo about harming you and then pretend to laugh it off like it was a joke. What you really mean is 'anti-social', which I don't have much of a choice but not live up to because I have to interact with you in order to find out what's going on here?”

Neptune helped Sun up and together they both nodded to Ren. Regardless of his suggestion that he wasn't a madman, neither felt at ease with him. The agency's policy was very similar to a Hunter
Academy's for good reason and that meant everyone was meant to have a partner despite the tradition that graduates could choose who they worked with an when.

The man called Lie Ren managed to defy that requirement by working alone. And what made that very concerning was that the leader of their group had accepted that defiance instead of kicking the reticent Hunter out so fast he got friction burns from the air. Whatever he had on or could threaten the boss like that had serious and terrifying mojo they didn't want to get on the wrong side of.

“Well actually...” Neptune started.

Sun picked up his slack as he trailed off, “...yeah... finding out what's going on is kind of your job. The boss was watching the area on that new space camera thing he got from Arc Industries...”

Now Neptune took the initiative back, “--and found this storm here. He came here himself, spent ten minutes an then sent for you. Frankly, we're feeling pretty damn lucky not to be you right now.”

“Yeah,” added Sun, “we do not want to be in your place right now.”

Ren looked up the mountain to the stationary thunderstorm. “And what exactly has all you so spooked about a stalled weather front?”

As if on cue, lighting flashed and a gleefully malicious laugh carried down to them from somewhere beneath the lingering cloud. Moments later, a bestial roar echoed from the same area along with a muffled explosion.

“Just watch.” Sun pointed skyward.

Ren's eyes traced the direction he was pointing and made out... something... flying up from somewhere near the lightning strike. As he watched, the thing grew large as it came relatively closer and resolved into—of all things—an ursa, it's arms and legs flailing in terror as it learned, very briefly, to fly.

Its trip ended in an almighty crash as its body tore through trees, bounced off half-buried boulders, and then came to a rest bent almost in half over a tree stump. Ren wasn't sure if it was his imagination, but it looked like the Grimm sighed in relief at the sweet release of death with its last breath.

“So... that's a thing that keeps happening,” said Sun, pointing to several areas where large objects had torn through other sections of forest. “And you're the lucky guy that gets to investigate.”

Ren glared at the pair with magenta eyes. His fellow agents seemed all to happy to leave him to deal with whatever it was on the mountain alone. What annoyed him most was that it was exactly what he would have requested—just without the snark and smug amusement.

“Fine.” He flicked his wrists and his weapons unfolded from within his sleeves. The Stormflower was a matched set of submachine guns with Dust ammunition and integrated curved blades. Not the strongest or most bombastic weapons available to Hunters, but they got the job done with precision and subtlety—just like him. “Tell command that I've started the mission. If I don't come back...” He regarded the two a moment, “write off the mission as a total loss.”

RWBYRWBYRWBY

It wasn't a difficult climb. Shade was home to older, more weathered fold mountains and lava domes that were more like large, gentle hills rather than the jagged murder-cliffs of Vacuo. That
geography, however lent itself to more hidden places for Grimm or other dangers to lurk and more pastoral views to lull hikers and explorers into a false sense of security.

Ren headed straight for the site where the thunderhead hovered; a channel of broken rock where a lava tube collapsed long ago, now choked with scrubby vegetation trying desperately to grow in the scree that eroded down from higher up.

The hard rain from the thundercloud added a new element to the mix, turning the natural path into a swamp with loose rocks standing in for sucking mud. Ren was forced to tap into his Aura reserves just to keep upright while traversing the slippery, shifting terrain.

After two hours, he finally reached the top of the tube; a place where a pocket of molten rock and volcanic gasses once bulged out part of the mountain before collapsing, leaving a shallow bowl and a wide gash where the feeder tube descended back into the heart of the mountain.

Once, it had probably been a picturesque place with natural pillars jutting into the air. Most of the pills had been freshly smashed and, judging by the scattered bits, at high velocity too. Scorch marks radiated out in fern patterns all over the ground, as if lightning had struck repeatedly in a very short time.

And someone had arranged the rocks in front of the feeder tube into a gigantic frowny face and surrounded it in a circle of runes Ren couldn't decipher.

What his best guess told him was that the person responsible for at least that and possibly the flying Grimm and the destruction all around him was the young, red-haired woman sitting atop the broken base of one natural pillar.

She wore boots and elbow length gauntlets of iron, and a leather war skirt that were in an archaic style but also in shades of pink that were impossible for those materials without modern manufacturing techniques. On her torso, she wore a simple, homespun white linen shirt under a black leather jacket lined with pink silk and adorned with six palm-sized solver discs arrange in two columns on either side of the open zipper. A bronze helm forged with a pair of flaring metal wings was meshed down over her messy locks like it was an after thought.

Across her knees was a truly massive warhammer with a head almost the size of her torso. Fingers that worked far too nimbly to be shod in iron gauntlets fiddled with the weapons' haft as the woman idly watched the hole in the ground.

Ren got the distinct impression of someone wiling a summer day away fishing. Only she was in the midst of an unseasonable downpour and she was watching a hole instead of a lake.

Of course, stranger things had happened to Ren in his years as an agent, so he took it in stride and made his way over to the woman, not bothering to hide his approach.

The redhead with the hammer didn't take any notice of him, so he cough as politely as he could while still being audible over the raging storm. Still nothing, so he moved to stand directly in front of her. “Pardon me, but my name is Lie Ren. I'm an agent of the Strategic Hazard Intervention Enforcement...”

“...and Logistics Directorate,” the woman finished alongside him. “Oh yeah, you guys again! You know, that's a long way to go just to spell out SHIELD, ya know?”

Ren sighed. “I am aware of that. I think the Director just likes to have fun with acronyms.”

In that case, I would have called you Supreme Headquarters, International Espionage, Law-Enforcement Division.”

“We... don't enforce any laws or carry out espionage.”

“Oh.” the mystery woman leaned back a moment, finger to her lips before coming back with, “How about Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division?”

Ren shrugged. “We don't serve any one Kingdom, so the question would be 'whose homeland'? Sounds like something Atlas would come up with and act like it did the same things we do.”

The girl threw up her hands, but not in any upset manner, more like she really couldn't care much more on the matter. “Oh well, everyone's just going to call you SHIELD anyway. The other thing is just too much of a mouthful.”

“Well yes, but...” Ren narrowed his eyes. “Wait. How did we get so far off topi? "I've been sent by... the agency in question... to find out what's going on here—you know with the thunderstorm that hasn't move din four days and the Grimm that get sent flying off the mountain?”

“The old man didn't tell you? He was here a couple days ago. He asked me to give you this.” The girl reached into her armored jacket and came out with a piece of soggy paper.

This time, when Ren's eyes narrowed, they weren't directed at at the woman, but at the note. He knew the writing before he read the contents. “The manipulative bastard,” he muttered as his eyes scanned the careful, precise handwriting of the Director of SHIELD.

‘Agent Lie Ren. For reasons I am almost certain will make themselves readily apparent in a very short time, the young woman who handed you this note has been labeled and Omega Level person if interest with the attendant Potential Threat Index. It is imperative to that she be attached to an operative as soon as possible to prevent any rogue activity and to help assimilate her into Remnant culture. Seeing as you are the only active agent without an assigned partner, I naturally considered you first, as this assignment might threaten the group dynamic of other teams. I trust you will do an exceptional job as always.'

Somehow, the signature beneath those words just oozed smugness.

Ren looked up from the note to the strange woman, who was watching him with the rapt anticipation of someone watching their best friend opening what they thought was going to be the perfect birthday gift. When she decided he'd finished reading, she exploded into a whirlwind of glee that ended in a crushingly tight hug.

“It says we're gonna be best friends!” she crowed, releasing him and stepping back to look him up and down. “Oh my gosh, I've never been friends with someone from Midgard before! Or anyone outside of Asgard. I mean I tried to make friends with a Jotun, but then my dad was totally not okay with me letting him cross the Bifrost to come hang out—even though he bought a bunch of his Jotun friends and we were totally going to spar because they all brought their weapons. And this other time, I tried to go to Alfheim to make friends, but don't let the cookie commercials fool you: elves are total jerks that just wanna stab you all the time. I mean what's up with that?

“Anyway, I know we'll have an awesome time. My brother gave me all kinds of magazines from Midgard before I got kicked... left... and I know exactly what we should do: we can stay up late doing each other's hair and go shopping and talk about cute boys—which I guess will be really easy since you're already a cute boy, so we can just talk about you. Oh! And we can totally fight Grimm because that's part of what I'm supposed to be doing here anyway, being a Valkyrie and all.
—by the way, I'm Nora—do you want to fight Grimm with me? Because that would be really awesome right now."

Hypnotized by the tsunami of words, Ren had to snap himself out of it before he could reply. "Look, we just met. If the Director wants us together, we're going to have to--"

He was cut off by Nora's gasp. "Really? The director wants us together? As in together-together? But it's so sudden. We hardly know each other, or what the other person's favorite foods are--"

Now it was Ren's turn to interrupt. "I didn't mean that kind of together. I meant as partners."

"Okay." Some of the light left the woman's eyes and she took a step back before reverting to her jubilant self. "But we're still going to fight Grim together, right?"

"Well," Ren started, but then Nora pointed past him into the hole.

Something huge was emerging. It reminded him of the minor, two-legged Grimm called Creeps with its hunch back and tapering tail, but this thing had four legs and was half the size of a Bullhead. "Too late!" Nora said, hefting her hammer. A wicked grin spread across her face. "Even the big one's can't resist good old dwarf rune magic forever! Come on, Ren!"

She launched herself at the thing, meeting it before it had fully dragged itself out of the lava tube. Her hammer cracked it mightily across the jaw causing it to stagger sideways and swipe at her with a massive foreclaw.

Not one to let his... ugh... partner get it alone, Ren rushed forward behind a withering barrage of fire from Stormflower, Big, old Grimm weren't all the susceptible to the low caliber ammunition Stormflower used, but the beast's reactions told him plenty about its weak points and combat behavior. Already he could tell it kept its head down to protect a vulnerable throat.

On the other hand, Nora was attacking as if simply planned to pound a vulnerability into the creature that wasn't there before. Constant hammer blows struck the creature from all angles as the freakishly agile Nora ran literal circles around it. She wasn't doing any more damage than Ren, but she was keeping it confused and busy.

Seeing his opening, Ren tapped his Aura just as Nora struck a blow under its chin, causing it to raise its head for the first time in the fight. The twin blades of Stormflower found their mark with ease, carving a pair of gruesome trenches in the behemoth that nearly decapitated it.

Nearly, however, was the key word. For this Grimm was very old and had grown very strong indeed. The black smoke that announced the decay of lesser Grimm poured from the wound as if it were bleeding, but the monster still moved, still fought.

"Ren, get back!" Nora had found her way back to the pillar she'd been sitting on earlier and was twirling her hammer overhead. Ren looked up to find the storm cloud twisting and rotating as if to follow the hammer's movements. He decided skepticism wasn't something he was willing to wager his life on and leapt back.

Lighting rained down. One, two—three brilliant bolts struck the Grimm in the back, causing it to roar in pain.

A forth struck Nora, white arcs crackling over her body as she laughed merrily and flexed muscles that were suddenly more defined. White fire lit in her eyes, and when she spoke, her voice boomed and reverberated across the mountainside and her inflection became dark and cold.
“Thou wretched beast who exists only to keep the departed from Helgafjell, from the glory of Valhalla, or the dread embrace of Hel. I.” She snapped the hammer forward and from Ren's point of view, it appeared that the hammer dragged her into the sky.

“Say.” Once airborne, she whirled the hammer around her, calling down dozens of bolts of lightning to the strike the head, riming her in brilliance.

“Thee.” Gravity took over once again and she plummeted, hammer drawn back for a mighty overhand blow. Sparks flew all around her. For its part, the giant Creep stared up, blinked once, then tried to back itself into the lava tube with an expression Ren would characterize as utter, pants-shitting terror if Grimm were capable of emotion. Or had a functional digestive system. Or wore pants.

It didn't make it, but not for the reasons one might expect.

“Nay!” Nora struck the earth. A rippled of force expanded out from her, concentrating into the spot just beneath the Grimm. A fountain of electricity, loose stone and water erupted as a column of lightning ejected the Grimm skyward.

Standing, Nora span her hammer through a transformation that collapsed it into a grenade launcher and took aim at the airborne Grimm. Two canisters with hand-painted hearts flew skyward, striking the Grimm in rapid succession, lifting it into the storm cloud where more lightning struck it.

Ren had never imagined he'd see the day he'd pity a Grimm, especially not one of the ancient horrors that routinely crippled and killed experienced Hunters. But... he kind of was.

As the beast began to descend, Nora span the grenade launcher back to hammer mode, licked the index finger of her gauntlet and held it up as if she could judge the wind be feel through the metal. Whatever she was measuring, it called for her to take two steps back and then one giant step sideways toward Ren. She gave him a cheeky grin and a wink before slipping into a solid stance and drawing her terrifying weapon back.

Dumbfounded, Ren watched as the Giant Creep landed right on in the path of a lightning-charge swing. The unfortunate Grimm managed to make eye contact with him for just a split second as if the cry 'help me' before a clap of thunder signaled its demise. The behemoth was already decaying into smoke as it arced out over the mountain side, headed for the unsuspecting valley below.

“Ahh.” Nora sighed as if she just finished a big, satisfying meal and leaned on her hammer. “That's better.”

Above, the storm cloud faded, breaking up until the light of a glorious sunset fell on the unlikely pair. Ren could only goggle at the beaming woman. Not that he had much experience with it himself, but it was obvious to him none the less: she hadn't just beaten that giant Grimm; she'd had fun doing it. She was looking forward to doing it again.

As his partner.

What new spore of madness had the Director unleashed upon him this time?

Chapter End Notes
So we take some time away from Jaune and Pyrrha to see what the villains of the piece and the rest of what had been Team JNPR are doing.

First, I'll address the elephant in the room: yes, Nora is stupid powerful. She's Thor. Thor is a god. I'm not going to depower a god character to avoid some accusations of overpoweredness or Mary Sue. Believe me, she has enough character flaws and foibles to make up for it. Plus, canon! Nora pulled a ring-out of four people at once and punched a Deathstalker's stinger through its body... so really, I haven't changed much. She is an absolute ton of fun to write, especially with Thor's fish-out-of-water thing grafted on.

Don't expect a whole lot of Thor-mythos to go on here because this is still Jaune's story first and foremost, but I have a few tricks up my sleeve involving these two. This also completes the AU set-up for the story: the divergence is 1) Jaune never cheated to get into Beacon and 2) Nora was never orphaned alongside Ren. There will be some more detail than that, but yes, the implication is intended that Nora in the 'real' universe really is a Goddess of Thunder. Because I can.

On to the villains... well I'm not going to hide it: yes, those are the ten rings. The ones that should have been in the third movie since jeez, we already had the infinity gems and aliens—why not Fin Fang Foom's people and the rings?

A bit of a spoiler here for the actual show, but this Cinder does NOT have the Fall Maiden powers. Luckily, the rings have a fire blast built in, so she's not exactly losing any power sets. As for the other party favors, well how did you expect me to populate the series with villains?

One thing I am nervous about is the fact that I've decided the SHIELD will be dedicated to dealing with the 'fairy tales that are real' issue Remnant seems to have. I have great ideas for the Two Brothers and The Girl in the Tower (which Pyrrha mentions on the show), but I have a suspicion we're going to see those in Season Four and it will date the crap out of my fic. Maybe I'll just make up my own like the Star Dragon. What do you folks think?
Pyrrha was feeling quite upbeat the next morning. Better, admittedly, than she had any right to after three weeks as a captive, several intimately close encounters with death, and still relying on a machine to keep her alive.

Those weren't the things on her mind though. She and Jaune were closer than ever after all that, and now they had a project! Not just any project, but one that promised her more of the action she'd been loathe to admit she missed and had real, lasting value for the world.

A renewed sense of purpose filled her as she got out of bed and went about her morning routine. Keeping in mind the press conference they had planned, she dressed at her most professional: an all-white suit with dark red accents and silk undershirt, matching low heels, and her favorite bronze tie. Briefly, she considered leaving her hair down, recalling Jaune's reaction the previous night, but she wasn't a blushing schoolgirl anymore and impressing a man didn't take priority over professionalism. So instead, she gathered her flame-colored mane into a thick braid and headed for the kitchen.

To her surprise, Jaune was already there, sitting at the kitchen table with breakfast already prepared.

The only times he'd ever been up before she arrived were all during her first year working for him when she'd enter the house to find an already drunk Jaune in the living room, stereo turned up to max, singing along to sad songs.

Not that the scene that greeted her was wholesome and domestic in the traditional sense. The words 'overdoing it' came time mind. He'd cooked up what looked like a buffet dinner for twelve with plates of pancakes, eggs, sausages, bacon, and hashbrowns lining the counters and crowding the table where he also had a holographic projector set up, running an autoCAD program. In bright lines of blue and green, Pyrrha recognized the basic shape of the armor he'd designed in the cave.

“What's all this?” she announced herself, standing in the doorway.

Jaune did a double take as if he wasn't expecting anyone for hours. He'd assembled a sandwich from all the breakfast food around him and had to swallow before replying. “Oh. Morning, Pyr. Um... I got up earlier than usual and just felt kinda... energize, ya know?” He glanced around the kitchen and gave her a sheepish look. “I'm... not used to cooking for two. Seven sisters, plus me and my parents; that's the kind of cooking I'm used to.”

Crossing the kitchen, Pyrrha grabbed a plate and started making selections for her own breakfast. “I didn't even know you could cook.”

He shrugged. “Haven't had to since you started staying over and had breakfast ready in the morning. Plus we pretty much eat out for lunch and dinner so...” Trailing off, he turned his attention back to the hologram of the powered armor.

Her selections made, Pyrrha took a seat at the only open space left at the table. For a while, she ate and he worked in silence. Much like a swan though, things looked serene, but there was a lot of work going on under the surface.
Pyrrha wrestled with the idea of pursuing his mention of his family. The Arc clan was an enigma to her. Jaune rarely spoke of them, and when he did, it was as if they weren't around anymore—something she knew for a fact wasn't true. All the same, there was never bitterness in his tone, only a wistful fondness as if he missed them dearly. And then he had said she was the only family he had back in the cave. Curiouser and curiouser.

By now, she figured it wouldn't be rude of her to ask, but when she opened her mouth, all that came out was, “So you got started early.”

While she cursed herself inwardly, Jaune, completely oblivious to her inner war, shrugged once more. “Really, I'm just transcribing the roughs I came up with in the cave to the autoCAD. I was going to start on the arc reactor redesign, but I figured you wanted to be here for that.”

In spite of herself, Pyrrha smiled warmly at that, hiding it by eating a forkful of egg.

Jaune shifted as if embarrassed and diverted his attention back to the image. “But I do already have a lot of ideas. For one, yours is going to need a better range of motion; something hydraulics aren't going to cut it for. I'm thinking an exoskeleton with artificial muscles integrated and then the armor layered over it.”

“What about yours?” she had no intention of letting him forget his part wasn't just as a designer anymore.

“Overbuilding,” said Jaune, “We both know I suck at fighting and the one or two sparring sessions we have a month isn't going to fix that. I'm thinking guns. Lots of guns.”

“Incoming call,” Glynda announced, interrupting, “from Weiss Schnee. Answer?”

“Speaking of guns...” Pyrrha mumbled. In all honesty, she would have expected Schnee Defense Contracts in the White Fang's hands, not Arc Industries. IF it were any other family or organization on Remnant, she would feel guilty about such prejudicial thoughts—or not have had them at all. But when it came to the Schnee family and their many corporate arms... well everyone knew they were as close to evil something could get without literally being a Grimm.

Almost everyone knew this.

Jaune perked up immediately. “Put her up on video, Glyn.”

Pyrrha didn't even resist the urge to face-palm. Despite Weiss's complete lack of reciprocation, Jaune acted like she was an old friend and flirted with her on top of that whenever the occasion arose. It was like what little common sense he had when it came to people had a gigantic Schnee-shaped hole in it.

The holographic screen appeared above the table, granting them a view of an imperious young woman in her mid-twenties with stark white hair done up in an off-center ponytail. Her porcelain skin was marred only by a thin scar over her eye which she made no effort to disguise or cover up.

“Good morning, Snow Angel,” Jaune's voice was suddenly unbearably oily. It shot past the false front of bravado he put up when it came to other women and became so actively skeevy that Pyrrha found herself shying away from him.

“Can we skip this... whatever it is you think you're doing for once?” Weiss snapped. Her voice quavered a little in more than the usual annoyance that was her usual mood when interacting with Jaune. Then her eyes lit on the hologram displaying the autoCAD program. “What is that?”
Faster than Jaune could even process the words, Pyrrha lunged across the table and shut the device off. “Nothing,” she said with a forced laugh, “Just a... mock-up for a... new toy design. Jaune is planning to launch a whole new division here at Arc Industries.”

She turned to Jaune and caught his eye, hoping she was conveying the point he'd made last night: that the powered armor concept stayed in the family. She only prayed that Weiss didn't count as part of the family or there would be Schnee powered armors all over the place within a month.

“Uh... yeah. Just a new...” Jaune looked at Pyrrha with a look that might ask 'seriously?'. “Toy?”

Weiss glared. “Because I have more important motivations for this call, I'm going to pretend that either of you possesses even the slightest proficiency at lying just to move this along. Now...” she hesitated, “Ruby called me last night. I suppose I should tell you on behalf of the Schnee family that we are happy to hear that you survived your ordeal.”

“Why thank you, Weiss,” said Jaune as if any of that sounded genuine.

The woman on the other end of the line, however was looking away from the camera, breathing slowly as if working herself up to something. After a few moments of not finding any better way to put it, she just stated things bluntly. “Ruby says that the two of you saw Blake.”

Both Jaune and Pyrrha remained awkwardly silent, both given the very real possibility of Blake's fate at their hands, and given Ruby's story about how Weiss and Blake parted company.

Seeing their reaction, Weiss stiffened, then let out a long breath. “Look. Ruby is so good at jumping to conclusions, it might as well be her Semblance, but sometimes she doesn't connect the dots right away, so first question: are you certain it was Blake and not just another cat faunus?”

Frowning, Pyrrha shook her head. “Ruby recognized the weapon she used.”

“Gambol Shroud,” Weiss muttered, “And Ruby never forgets a weapon. Alright, then two: I've... well we own the contractor hired to clean up the munitions at the site where you were held. I've... seen pictures. Was there any chance that... well I mean, are you sure Blake was there when things happened?”

The pair at the kitchen table shared a look, each silently asking if the other had seen the woman in question the day of their escape. Eventually, they both shook their heads. “We didn't see her, but we weren't really looking out for who was where,” Jaune admitted.

Weiss let out a sigh. “Then there is a chance.”

“I thought you parted on bad terms.” Pyrrha raised an eyebrow.

“I... well we did, but I do wish we hadn't.” Weiss looked down. “We had a rocky start after I learned she was a faunus and a former member of the white Fang, but we got past it. And then...” She paused to catch her breath, “After graduation, I made a mistake. It's funny that Blake always said she was the one who ran away from her problems when it's me who always simply gave into them.

“My father wanted me close and so offered our whole team positions in the SDC. I convinced them all to take the job.”

“Ruby says he said some awful things about faunus around her.” Jaune was no longer sounding very friendly at all toward the Atlasian. Pyrrha had to glance aside to make sure the same person was speaking. “And you didn't back her up.”
"Tears—actual tears—were forming in Weiss's eyes. “I know! Like I said, I wasn't strong enough to defy my father in his own house. I should have, but instead... I took his side because that’s what was expected of me. I planned to apologize later—suggest we quit as a team. But I said something way out of line and Yang punched me. By the time I woke up, the whole team was gone.”

She took a moment to compose herself wipe the tears away. “I don't know what happened to you while you were captured. Nor do I know what part Blake played in it. What I would like you to know is that Blake was... is not a bad person. Misguided possibly. Hurt most certainly. But she didn't deserve to... to... go like that. Whatever you take from what happened to you, please keep that in mind.”

There was a moment of silence before Jaune spoke up. “We already have, Weiss. Actually, I'm kind of glad you told us this because it means you'll understand what's about to happen today.”

“Excuse me?”

Jaune looked to Pyrrha, his determination to do what he'd planned the night before blazing behind his eyes. “Just trust me on this, Weiss: don't be at the SDC or answer any called from your father today. You'll enjoy your life a lot more if you don't.”

With that, he gestured, signaling Glynda to kill the call before Weiss could ask any more questions.

Closing his eyes, he leaned back in his seat. As he did, Pyrrha regarded him in silence. While he hadn't related to he exactly what he planned to do, she knew him better than almost anyone and a picture was beginning to form. If she was correct in her assumptions, well... simultaneously her heart swelled with pride in him and her spine chilled in terror.

The push back would be brutal. People would try to kill him over it. Not the least of which would be Wilhelm Schnee—if by proxy.

Judging by the 'what the hell am I doing?' look playing on Jaune's face, he knew it too. It also made her painfully aware that she'd helped move his thoughts in that direction—if that was where they were in the first place. She chastised herself for pretending she could know his mind one hundred percent.

Still, it wasn't a difficult deduction to reason out his best course of action to accomplish what they talked about the night before, so she took a chance to hazard: “You know you don't have to do anything if you feel uncomfortable or that it's too dangerous.”

Jaune gave her a look that bore the weight of the world, but there was nothing in his gaze that even questioned how she'd guess his plan was going to be dangerous. “Yes, I kind of do. My grandfather always said it was in the blood. 'Jaune,' he'd say, 'if anyone ever saw an Arc that wasn't rushing off on some damn fool crusade over something he thinks is the right thing to do, then that fella is looking at an Arc that's just died on that damn fool crusade and left this world with no regrets.'

“I can't just do nothing anymore. Especially after that call. I mean anyone that could get Weiss to say something nice about them... well Blake must have really deserved it. I don't want to be responsible for another Blake, know what I mean?”

Pyrrha nodded. Of course she did.

“But... I get that bad things probably are going to happen from this. I'd understand if you didn't want to be my bodyguard with me putting my body in all this extra damage on purpose.”

“Jaune, I'm the one that sort of suggested this to you in the first place. And even if that wasn't the
case, do you honestly think I would abandon you when you need me most?"

“It'd probably be in your best interest, but no, I guess not.” He scrubbed his hand through his 
shaggy, blonde hair. “Thank you. I mean, I probably don't say that enough, but seriously: thank 
you.” She offered a warm smile at that. “No need. Arcs don't have a monopoly on damn fool crusades for 
what's right. I'll set up the press conference for two o'clock at the main Arc Industries R&D Center 
in Vale. Does that sound good?”

He nodded and she took out the Scroll she'd commandeered as her own earlier. Glancing aside at 
him, she added, “That also gives us some time to work on the new arc reactor design.”

Jaune nodded, his lips turning up just a bit. “Sounds like fun.”

RWBYRWBYRWBY

The mood in the atrium to the R&D Center was tense to say the least. At Jaune's insistence, not 
only had Pyrrha informed the mainstream new affiliates and business papers, but extended 
invitations to certain other journalistic organizations such as the Menagerie Free Press, Tail, Ears 
and Paw Magazine, and Equality Free Press. The 'respected' journalists found themselves packed in 
next to faunus freelancers who never seemed to get the nod to attend the Remnant Press Club and a 
confused rumble was already beginning.

“You don't think I'm going to have to shoot them, do you?” as military liaison to Arc Industries, 
Ruby would have been there whether she'd been asked to come or not. Luckily, she had been asked 
and warned ahead of time what was going down. “Are you sure we can't wait for Yang to get back 
from Mistral? Cracking heads is more her kind of thing.”

“Last we heard she was already on her way back after you told her about Blake.” Jaune still felt 
odd referring to his old captor in such familiar terms, but for Ruby's sake didn't let on how 
unnatural it felt. “But she was way off the beaten path with an reclamation force. It'll take her at 
least a week to get to Vale.”

Reclamation forces were a new thing on Remnant; a side effect of the emergence of Helios and 
other Arc Tech weaponry allowing humanity to push the Grimm back and hold them there. Ruins 
abandoned since before the Great War were now able to be investigated and cleared from places 
that had once been deep in Grimm territory. Ruby's sister, Yang, had all but invented the vocation 
of reclamer, which might as well have been called adventurer, given it entailed beating up 
monsters, traveling to exotic lands and hunting for treasure.

Ruby looked out over the assembled members of the press. Some of them were already eyeing one 
another like it was their first day in prison. “That doesn't answer my first question.”

“No shooting anyone, Ruby.” Pyrrha laid her hands on the younger woman's shoulders and turned 
her around so she was facing Jaune. “Jaune has all this well in hand. Right, Jaune?”

“How many shots per round can you fire?” Jaune asked, not entirely joking.

“Jaune.” Pyrrha said flatly, feeling Ruby stiffen in her hold.

“It'll be fine.” Jaune said so woodenly he feared getting a splinter. He gave his two friends one last 
look before stepping out of the little alcove they'd been waiting in and took to the podium set up in 
front of where the reception area of the atrium usually stood. Ruby and Pyrrha came out behind 
him and took seats flanking him.
Ruby had her weapon, Crescent Rose out and in its scythe form. She made sure to shoulder it so as to give anyone who might want to start some violence a good view of its curved blade. Pyrrha had no obvious weapons, but he knew that she carried two pockets full of steel deer shot at all times. That didn't sound like much unless someone was aware that her Semblance was polarity: the control of magnetism and she was very, very skilled with it.

Jaune shuddered, recalling the day she showed him why she didn't need to carry a weapon on her while body-guarding for him by sending a butter knife through a three-inch steel plate. He didn't want to know what the deer shot could do.

Gaining the podium, he felt himself calm as his purpose for being there came to mind again. It wasn't hard to remember since where he stood, the human-faunus divide was evident in that very room. At least they stopped their grumbling when he started to speak.

“Thanks for coming today. I know it was short notice, but we just got back and this is really something that shouldn't have to wait. As you know, three weeks ago, an Atlastian military convoy I was part of was attacked and my...” he paused only for the space of a breath, trying to find the right word of Pyrrha. He quickly decided that they knew her as his assistant and anything beyond that was none of their business, “...assistant Pyrrha Nikos and I were captured. I can confirm that my captors were indeed the White Fang and the cell involved was personally led by Adam Taurus.”

Now came the hard part: the glossing over of everything having to do with the powered armor.

“After a harrowing three weeks, however, we managed to escape with the help of the Atlas military and were able to return home last night.” He took a deep breath, calculated to seem meaningful, and than continued, “I say harrowing, but really, it was eye opening. I learned a lot of things from my time there. Some personal some... some pressing. We're going to talk about the latter.”

Licking his lips, he plunged forward. “First of all, I learned that the White Fang has somehow been obtaining Arc Industries weapons designed to destroy Grimm and have used them on humans and faunus—both military and civilians. As we speak, a probe s being launched and until I see results, effective immediately, all shipments of Arc Industries munitions and weapons platforms will be frozen.”

Everything about human or faunus was forgotten at that. A ripple went through the room that was something like panic. Idly, Jaune wondered if the Grimm could feel it that far away and if they would be rushing Vale's defenses because of it. A dozen questions were volleyed at him, but he just held up his hand.

“Hold on. Hold on.” They settled down enough to listen, “All installation, maintenance, and replacements for Helios, Aegis and the Minerva drones will continue as scheduled with no interruptions. I just need to make sure that the munitions are going where they're supposed to and I hope you can all understand how important that is.”

There was more muttering as the reporters all tried to decide how to spin this. Was Jaune Arc taking responsible action with the company he'd barely exerted any control over before, or was he doing something stupid and rash that would doom the entire enterprise?

He almost smiled, knowing he was about to blow that story off the front page. “But that's not all I learned. The most important think I think I'll take away from my imprisonment is something I learned about the White Fang.”
Silence.

They probably thought he'd uncovered some bit of secret intel or a conspiracy. Jaune wasn't sorry to disappoint.

“"I learned that they're people. They're not the scary monsters they're made out to be, they're just people. Don't get me wrong, they're horribly misguided and their use of violence is something that shouldn't be forgiven... but they didn't have to be this way.”

Now he was getting harrumphs and doubting whispers just as he'd expected.

“The way human society treats the faunus population is nothing short of disgusting. They're people just like us except for a few minor physical differences and suddenly we act like they're a lesser species who don't deserve the same opportunities for jobs, or housing, or basic respect? That isn't right. That's terrible! And until last night, I wasn't really doing anything about it.”

He leaned closer to the mic so his voice thundered out of the speakers. “That ends now. I've sent a new directive to every management level or higher employee at Arc Industries stating that effective this morning, Arc Industries will be conforming to the Equality International recommended guidelines for hiring policies, penalties for discrimination or harassment and pay equity. If they weren't before, now every employee at Arc Industries will be afforded the same rights, benefits and dignity. And we will terminate our corporate relationships with any company that doesn't follow suit within one hundred and eighty days.”

The atrium was in an uproar. Someone was actually booing him while the faunus reporters were looking to each other dumbstruck. Jaune came to his finale, hoping it would at least become a soundbyte.

“I've seen the horrors of the White Fang. Starting today, I am making it my mission not to destroy them—but to make them obsolete. No further questions.”

The news crossed the oceans fast enough, and within hours, under the blazing desert sun in Vacuo, Adam Taurus got the news of what his former captor and the man he now most wanted to kill was up to.

“So he thinks that if he throws us 'animals' a bone, we'll wag out tails and roll over so he can scratch our bellies?” He absently touched the heavy bandages over the right half of his face as he stared out over his underlings as they combed the desert sand searching on his behalf.

One of them came up with something: an iron mask he recognized all too well. Adam watched as it was added to the back of the old pick-up where his people were slowly but surely gathering the destroyed pieces of powered armor.

“Thirty-five of my brothers and sisters were taken from my by this scum—including Blake. If he thinks I'll suffer losing her again like this...” He grit his teeth and clenched his fist. “I will destroy everything he loves in this world.” A malicious grin crossed his features as his mind's eye filled with a vision with cascading red hair. “Starting with her.”

“Hello?”

Jet lag was a hell of a thing. It was even worse when you got no sleep on your flight because a
hyperactive little woman was bombarding you with questions even a five-year-old knew. Oh, and then when you get to your agency-provided hotel room (which thankfully had two beds)? Of course she snores like an Ursa gargling chainsaws.

Ren opened one bloodshot eye to locate Nora. Well her feet at least. Her legs were still mostly on the bed while the rest of her was sprawled on the floor between their two beds, arms akimbo, helm askew. Ren made her sleep in her clothes because apparently she had no other clothing and like hell was he going to let her sleep in the nude in the same room as him.

“I trust you made your way back to Vale in one piece, Mr. Lie.” The Director's voice reminded Ren that he'd just answered his Scroll.

“Mostly,” Ren deadpanned.

“And how is your new partner?”

“Utterly insane. Can you at least explain to me what's wrong with her? She acts like it's her first time on Remnant.”

There was a chuckle on the other end of the line. Not a good sign in Ren's opinion. “Oh Mr. Lie... that would be because it is.”

“Excuse me?”

“You really should take time to ask her about herself, unlike you did with your last partner.” Ren scowled. His last partner had been assigned to him as part of some asinine initiation back when he's gone to Beacon. As far as he knew, neither had come to the most prestigious Academies in the world to make friends and their arrangement had been mutually beneficial. The Director kept speaking, “And do be quick about apprising yourself of her situation: the two of you will be catching a mission soon.”

Ren set his jaw. “Should I be worried?”

“I'll leave that up to you: what do you know about a man named Jaune Arc?”

Chapter End Notes

Light on the action, but here we start the second arc, based loosely on the MCU Iron Man's press conference and the fallout thereof. Whereas Tony tanked his stock price though, Jaune just told every racist sociopath in the world that he wants their bullets. Might cause him some problems.

The Weiss scene here was always planned, but I moved it up because I didn't want people to hate Weiss too much for what happened with Blake. It's less that she reverted to form and more that she couldn't stand up for her friend when her dad was involved.

Oh yeah, and I finally decided who Yang will be fused with. You will never guess, I promise you.

I'm also trying to make the romance more... mature. Not in the sexy-times way, but in that the characters aren't teenagers blushing all over each other in this. They're mid-twenties, most have had to grow up faster than they'd like and they can genuinely
handle themselves better to the extent their character will allow. These two wouldn't be these two without the mutual dorky dynamic they have after all.

And finally, I'd like to point out that if you like this fic, you might also like my original published work, which you can find on my profile page. I am an actual 'getting paid for this' author with his own creations and such. I've even toyed with doing a fusion with my own work. Apropos here: a Rune Breaker/RWBY fusion where Ruby gets stuck on a journey with Cinder mystically linked to do her bidding.
Jaune, Pyrrha and Ruby watched the fallout from the former's office at the R&D Lab; Jaune and Pyrrha sharing the leather couch while Ruby slowly span herself around in the office chair.

Every station that dealt in news and every local affiliate was abuzz with the news coming out of Arc Industries. The consensus was more positive than they expected to an extent. No stations declared him a traitor to humanity or called for his blood, but there were numerous 'experts' trotted out to talk about how humans might soon be losing jobs to faunus workers or how prices might go up if faunus started being paid more.

Attitudes had changed since the days of the Faunus Wars. Mobs weren't forming to beat faunus to death in the streets and governments weren't trying to banish them to their 'own' lands like Menagerie anymore. No, the hatred was more subtle, couched as if they were asking too much to be treated like everyone else, or as if giving them more meant giving everyone else less. The slow poison instead of the brutal knife.

And that was when they weren't coyly suggesting that the whole thing was because Jaune was afraid or even brainwashed by the White Fang. Of course the stop on munitions shipments had been buried by the faunus angle.

“So... no torches and pitchforks. That's a good sign, right?” Jaune asked the two women in the room.

“At least until Humanity First or the Kennel Krew come after you,” Ruby said, playing with Jaune's stapler.

Jaune raised an eyebrow. “And those are...”

“Human Rights Activists. Uh... as in human supremacists, not people in favor of human rights.” She made a face as she reconsidered her wording. “Well unless you mean rights only for humans, I guess.”

Pyrrha rubbed the side of her face with an exasperated groan. “Why would such a thing even exist? Humans are already given every advantage over faunus we can get away with in all four kingdoms.”

The red-clad military liaison shrugged. “Just like the guy on TV was 'totally not saying': if the faunus don't get anything... they win or something? I don't know. I guess guys like Weiss's dad would be against it because he wouldn't be able to pay them crap to work in his mines.”

“Oh yeah, the SDC is gonna be pissed,” said Jaune. He imagined he could hear Weiss shrieking in annoyance from where he sat. “Luckily, I don't think I have any other major business partners that'll be all that upset other this.”

Seeing as it was Jaune Arc and he was tempting fate, the universe was quick to respond.

The door to the office burst open and a thunderhead with black hair and orange eyes otherwise known as Cinder Fall stomped in. “Arc!? Is this where you're hiding?”
Jaune, not sure what to do, stood and raised a hand to wave. “Heya Cinder! Is that new jewelry? It's really—urk!”

Indeed, Cinder was sporting new jewelry: ten rings, each with a different color stone. One bejeweled hand gripped his collar and she walked him backward until his back thudded against the wall. “Just what the hell do you think you're doing?”

Instantly, Pyrrha was on her feet, one strong hand firmly on Cinder's wrist. “Let him go!”

For her trouble, she got the full force of that blazing glare. “Back off, Red. I'm having a conversation with my partner. And if you don't let go of me right now, I will have you fired, then I will sue you for assault, and you will never work in a civilized kingdom again.”

Pyrrha didn't budge or let up on the pressure she was applying to the other woman's wrist at all. “If anyone has grounds to file assault charges, it would be Jaune. And you can't fire me: I work for him.” With a strong tug, she disengaged Cinder's hand from Jaune's shirt, though she was unable to make her back up at all. She then let go of the offending hand. “And in case you forgot, Jaune just got home from being held captive by terrorists for three weeks. So nice of you to show your concern.”

Drawing in a deep breath, Cinder made it a clear point to ignore Pyrrha. “Glad to have you back, Arc. Now explain your damn self! Do you have any idea what the impact this is going to have? Have you checked the stock price?”

“I figure it's going to drop... maybe forty points before all is said and done,” said Jaune. “But it will be better for everyone in the long run, especially once we start bringing in the best faunus researchers and engineers. It might be a bad few years, but think about where this company will be in ten, twenty years.”

Cinder grit her teeth. “Investors don't care about ten or twenty years, Arc. They care about growth now. No one invests to build anything: they want to get in, watch the stock pump up and make money. And guess what, Arc? They have rights too. Now I'm going to go bat for you—as much as I would like to beat you to death with your bodyguard—but no more of this ready, fire, aim business, alright?”

Seeing her calming, Jaune started to relax himself, “A-alright.”

Cinder massaged her temple with the heel of one hand. “Of course, that still leaves the one issue of this move totally alienating the Schnee Dust Company. You know that even if our products don't use much Dust, we need it to power everything we do here, right? I mean this facility has you little... science project.” She glanced toward the western wall, beyond which, Jaune knew, stood the chamber where the original prototype Arc Reactor stood, still powering the facility after almost five years of active service.

“But we both know the Arc Reactor... that's a dead end technology. You haven't made any advances in that since you built the thing...”

It wasn't hard for Jaune to notice Cinder's eyes wandering toward the region of Pyrrha's chest, which prompted his bodyguard/assistant to cross her arms in an effort to conceal everything in that area. Of course, Cinder wouldn't be interested in anything there except...

“Okay, who told you?” He asked.

“Whatever do you mean?” Cinder played innocent, even though her gaze was still fixed on Pyrrha's
“Come on, someone told you. Was it Ruby?”

“Hey! I was with you guys the entire time!”

Jaune shot her an apologetic look. Whenever a secret got blabbed, it usually really was Ruby, after all. “Was it one of the doctor's from Atlas?”

“Never mind who told me, let's see it.” Cinder took a step toward Pyrrha, who skipped back two and fell into a defensive stance. Undeterred, Cinder motioned at her. “Come on, just open your shirt, let's see.”

“I am not going to strip for your curiosity!” Pyrrha's voice went higher than it normally did as her eyes darted around the room with consternation.

Before Cinder could press the issue, Jaune stepped between the two. “Cindy? We both know it's a miniature Arc Reactor. Yes, I got it working,” Cinder opened her mouth, but he cut her off, “And no, I'm not passing it off to R&D. Not yet.”

“What not? That's a billion lien patent right there.”

“Well for one, the only prototype in existence is keeping my best friend from dying. For another, it's just not ready, okay? Let me work on it a couple more months in my real lab with real materials. I'll have something for the stockholders and all their rights, alright?”

Cinder looked past him to Pyrrha for just a few moments before nodded. “Very well, Jaune. But keep me apprised of your progress. In the meantime, I need to go and tend to our deal to take over Vale's security. Atlas is objecting to the idea that we'll end their airship patrols.”

As subtly as he could manage, Jaune moved himself so he was blocking Cinder's view of Pyrrha. He got the sensation of being squeezed inside a vice made of baneful stares. “Where would they get that idea? Arc Industries doesn't even have an airship division.”

“But Torchwick does.” Cinder gave him a smirk. “Or at least he produces passenger ships. With the right investments, however, I'm sure he could go into full military production by the end of the year. Lucky for him he's very likely to have an influx of contracts now that Arc Industries has halted munitions shipping.” As she said this last part, she stepped in closer to him and trailed a finger up his chest before tapping him right on the heart.

Jaune blanched, half-imagining that she could shove that finger into his chest as he process that last part.

Seeing understanding dawn on him made Cinder's smirk even more intense. “Surprised? Why it's almost as if your actions have consequences, isn't it? That is the kind of thing the board will be looking at, Arc; not some projections for ten years from now.”

“What...” Jaune started, but she pressed the same finger she'd tapped his chest with to his lips.

“Shh. This is why you came to me in the first place, now isn't it? I'll take care of it. But do be more careful.” With that, Cinder turned and strutted out of the office without so much as a goodbye. Jaune was left staring after her, paralyzed with an uncomfortable fear he couldn't put a name to.

A small voice piped up beside him. “That woman gives me hives.” Ruby drew out the last word with a quivering note that made it clear she was shivering as she said it.
“Why exactly did you decide to work with her?” Pyrrha chimed in.

Jaune raked his fingers through his blonde mop and shook his head violently, beginning to pace. “Because I am a terrible business man who make really stupid choices. D-did I really just manage to do nothing but line Torchwick's pockets? If he's just going to fill in the void with his knockoffs of my weapons, what did I accomplish?”

While Pyrrha was still thinking of a response to that, Ruby fell into step next to him as he paced. “Well it's not like he can crank out that much boom overnight. And not everyone trusts his stuff. I know General Ironwood doesn't. Speaking of, I for one am keeping my scroll off for the rest of the day. Technically, I'm on leave anyway.”

“So he'll get his weapons from Schnee. Is that any better? Let's face it: I didn't think this through and ended up just hurting myself and my company without helping anyone.” He dropped onto the couch and doubled over, staring at the floor as if it would offer an answer.

A moment later, the couch dipped as another weight joined him and a hand landed on his shoulder. “This was not for nothing, Jaune,” Pyrrha said firmly. “Did you already forget that you stopped the munitions shipment to root out whoever was sending weapons to the White Fang? We can still do that and possibly pass on that information to help track them down. And that wasn't even the main reason you held this press conference.

“Remember the faunus, Jaune? Making things better for them so they won't have to turn to groups like the White Fang? That's the real thing that happened today. I have no doubt that you started something—something grand that will change the world as much as Helios did. And I for one am proud of you for doing that, regardless of the risk.”

“Same here.” Ruby hopped up on the arm of the couch on his other side. “No matter how mad the General gets, you did the right thing, Jaune. Never forget that.”

Releasing a long breath, Jaune nodded and sat up. “You guys are right, I guess. But I'm really not feeling so hot anymore. Pyr, you think we'll be clear to head home anytime soon? I feel the need to just hurl myself into some work.”

“We parked in the employees-only garage, so we shouldn't run into any problems. We can go anytime you're ready.”

“That'd be now.” Jaune rocked once before getting off the couch. He turned to Ruby. “Rubes? Thanks for being here for moral support. It means a lot, especially given how Ironwood is gonna be pissed when he sees you were right there.”

The diminutive Reaper waved it off with a dorky snort. “No worries. Like I said, I'm on leave til the end of the week, then there's your party, and after that, I pulled the 'Huntress' card and volunteered to lead some first years at Beacon on their first mission next week.”

“Well that sound like you've got...” Jaune paused. “Wait... my party?”

Ruby raised both eyebrows at him. “The Arc Foundation Charity Ball? You hold it every year? Last year Yang go kicked out for trying to steal an entire vodka watermelon and the owner of Choclat Boutique poured her drink on your head?”

Without thinking, Jaune turned to Pyrrha. “That one wasn't me being bad at flirting. It's that she makes all my suits and she noticed I was wearing one of her creations with a store-bought tie. Totally understandable.”
Pyrrha allowed herself a tiny grin. “I do remember taking that suit to get dry cleaned after the fact.”

“I forgot all about that—you know, with the terrorists and all,” Jaune said, “Do I have to RSVP for my own party?”

“I'll look into that.” said Pyrrha.

Jaune grinned, seemingly having forgotten his earlier breakdown. “Sweet. We'll see you there, Rubes. Probably won't be out of the compound until then though. You heard Cinder—I need to get to work on a refined arc reactor... for the stockholders.”

Ruby nodded. “Great. I'll see you guys later then.”

Giving a tiny wave, she headed out of the office.

“Bye Ruby!” Pyrrha called after her. It was while she was waving, that her brain finally caught up to something she'd heard but hadn't paid much mind to. “Wait—we'll see her at the ball? I've never gone to any of these things before.”

Jaune shrugged. “It's a good time. After what you've gone through, I figured you deserved—gah!”

He'd just glanced out the door to see if Ruby was gone. In her place, he came face-to-face with an odd, intimidating pair.

The man, who was standing in the middle of the doorway, was wearing a green tailcoat that looked like it had just been dragged out of a suitcase with magenta cuff emerging from the sleeves and black suit pants. A single lock of his hair shared colors with the cuffs, but his stiff, taciturn bearing was at complete odds with his attire.

He didn't have to look far to find out where the coat that went with the man's pants went. Behind him was a short woman wearing said suit coat over what looked like armor, a pink leather skirt and a winged helmet. She was leaning on a gigantic hammer while busily stuffing various bags of candy and chips into the coat's pockets.

They were both wearing sunglasses, though the woman's had slipped down to reveal laughing blue eyes of a slightly different shade than Jaune's own.

“What's wrong?” Pyrrha was at Jaune's side almost before his yelp left his mouth. When she saw who was there, she fell instantly silent.

The strange man, however, paid her no heed. “Mr. Jaune Arc?”

“Are you here to kill me?” It was a completely legitimate question given the month Jaune was having, but he really wished he hadn't led with that.

“My name is Agent Lie Ren of the Strategic—”

“SHIELD!” the women behind him cried gleefully. “We're from SHIELD. Well Ren's from SHIELD, I just kinda joined this morning. The director gave me an honorary badge and everything!” She reached into a pocket and pulled it out, spilling a half dozen candy bars and bags of pretzels to spill out along with a badge bearing her photo and the name Nora Valkyrie.

“Is that all from the vending machine down the hall?”

Nora nodded enthusiastically. “Yes, thank you! Your smorgasbord was most bountiful, though the door to the glass cabinet it was in was kinda stuck, but don't worry; me and Magnhild took care of
that!” He picked up the hammer and waved it casually as if it didn't weight at least fifty pounds.

“Uh...huh.” Jaune started to back away slowly.

About that time, Pyrrha finally found her voice again, speaking with deliberate, structure calm, the voice she used when meeting with prospective clients and business partners. “Hello, Ren. It is good to see you again.”

Ren gave her a polite but stoic nod, though his eyes never left Jaune. “Hello, Pyrrha. Now, Mr. Arc, we need to debrief you on the circumstances of your escape. We at the Strategic--”

“SHIELD!” Nora moved faster than any of the other three expected, seeming to teleport between Ren and Jaune. “Hi by the way!” she said to Pyrrha. “I haven't made and female friends in Midgard. Can we be friends? It'd be so great, especially since you already have a cute boy too—we could talk about them!”

Taken aback by the hurricane of words, Pyrrha actually stepped back a little from Nora. “I... um, suppose we can—depending on what SHIELD wants with Jaune. Ren? Is this your partner?”

“Yes!” Nora zipped back to Ren and grabbed his arm, shaking him violently. “The director said so! He said it was an order because Ren might be the only one who can stop me from wrecking Vale—not that I wanna wreck Vale, but accidents do happen, you know? Anyway, we've already had so much fun! Ren took me on a ride on a sky chariot, then we went to this huge hall where they give you 'rooms' that are actually also halls all crammed together in the same building! I think it's called a Valeian Arms Hottle. And there was this window that let us watch these rich people in a big house have love affairs and try to kill each other! I never though Midgard would be so great!”

Ren finally managed to wriggle free of Nora's grasp and right himself, adopting his stoic demeanor again while readjusting his coat. “She's... new. And involuntary.”

“Oh course.” Pyrrha said, and this time even Jaune could pick up something off about her behavior.

He cleared his throat. “Now's actually not so good a time to talk about... that thing we did. How about you call my...” unusual for him, he caught himself before he suggested the person whose presence was bothering Pyrrha call Pyrrha to set up a meeting. “You know what, I'm going to write down my private scroll number for you and you can call me to set something up, okay, buddy? We need to get out of here.”

Before Ren could say anything else, Jaune had a business card out and had scrawled the necessary digits on it. “There you go, buddy. Now we're gonna get out of here. Don't worry about the cost of the vending machine, or the big divot your partner's hammer just dug into my floor—it's all good.”

With that, he caught Pyrrha's hand and led her out past the two agents, heading for the parking garage.

“Bye! Hope to see you soon!” Nora offered them a cheery wave as the pair disappeared around a corner.

Ren just face-palmed and let out a groan.

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“Why are you in such a hurry all of a sudden?” Pyrrha asked as they reached Jaune's reserved spot.
He shot her a brief 'are you kidding me?' look before digging into his pockets for his keys. “You wanna drive?”

Pyrrha blinked as he tossed her the keys. She was so out of sorts that she had to use her polarity to pull them to her hand. “Your car? You've never let anyone drive your car.”

“You look like you need to drive angry.”

“That's even less of a reason to let me drive your car.” It was a custom electric sport's car he'd had commissioned in Mistral; the fastest thing it was legal to drive on public streets. It was also built like a tank to survive Jaune's now-passed bouts of drunken cruising.

He shrugged. “I can always get a new one.” Slapping the top of the passenger side roof, he added, “Are we going or not?”

Pyrrha gave him a dubious look, but climbed in. A minute of seat adjustments later, the incredibly expensive car peeled out of the garage and roared out onto the surface streets, swiftly putting the R&D center behind them. Even as upset as she was, Pyrrha wasn't half as reckless as Jaune was calm—which wasn't to say they weren't being followed by a chorus of angry horns and screeching brakes.

In the passenger seat, Jaune ignored the symphony of chaos they were writing and watch Pyrrha for a few miles. Her gaze was fixed intently on the road. So much so that he half-expected her to fire lasers from her eyes and cut a gouge through the asphalt. Her knuckles were white from her grip on the wheel and her jaw was set hard enough to crush ball bearings.

“Wanna talk about it?” he finally asked.

“About what?” she ground out between clenched teeth.

“Mr. Sunglasses back there? You were trying to be nice to him, then got crazy pissed when he didn't reciprocate. Is he like... and ex-boyfriend or something?”

That made her wrinkle her nose. “No. No, definitely not. We were partners at Beacon but nothing like that. We weren't...” she took a breath, “We weren't even really friends.” After a few moments, she said in a smaller voice, “I didn't make any friends—real friends until I transferred to Menagerie and met Velvet. And she was it until I started working for you, and you introduced me to Ruby and Yang.”

She fell silent for another few miles, weaving in and out of traffic at a frantic pace, but not turning toward the road out of the city and toward the Arc Compound. Jaune kept his mouth shut, sensing she needed time.

“That's the problem. I've... I had a lonely life, Jaune. I told you about how my mother was a Huntress. She was so dedicated to her work that she didn't even know how to bond with me if it wasn't through sparring. I don't think I told you that my father was a diplomat—they met because she was assigned to his security detail while he was touring Grimm-haunted villages. He was the one who gave me all the... more traditional affection.

“And then he died. A flock of Nevermores overwhelmed a transport he was on and it crashed outside of Haven. Mother took it so hard because she couldn't protect him that night. She threw everything she had into making sure that if she couldn't protect me, I would be more than capable of surviving. She taught me that losing was death and winning was life. Even in tournaments.”

She threw them around a hard right turn and Jaune was jostled around in his seat, but still he said
nothing. They'd hardly talked about her past before and he wasn't going to interrupt her now.

“That made it worse. Before, I was set apart because of whose daughter I was—then suddenly, I was some ace fighter and I was set apart because who I was—who everyone expected me to be. I was Pyrrha Nikos, Champion, the Invincible Girl. Not Pyrrha Nikos, person. Everyone who got up the nerve to approach me was either trying to get something from me, or a fan in love with what they read in magazines. I have no real friends.”

The tired screamed as she pulled a U-turn and set them on the highway back to the compound, angry horns blaring all over.

“So I applied to Beacon instead of Haven. I figured if I was on the other side of the world, maybe I wouldn't be recognized.” She took a deep breath, “I was wrong. When it came down to teams, I ended up with two of my biggest fans and Lie Ren. For just a few moments, I thought Ren could be my friend—could be someone I could just be a person with... but he had his own problems.

“I know I shouldn't blame him for how things were. He had his own traumas. His village was attacked and something took his childhood friend right from beside him while he could do nothing.” She shook her head, looking haunted, “He can't even remember her face or her name: only the screams as she was grabbed and pulled up into the sky. He told me that from that day forward, he only wanted to get stronger and better—just like my mother, he cared for nothing but winning at all costs because that was all that was left for them...

“...and I was really just the perfect training partner for that end. That was all I was. I was just some.. glorified training robot to my own partner and Rika and Azure couldn't stop asking me questions about tournament wins and things like that to see if I wanted to go shopping with them, or see a movie.”

The car slowed down, though it was still going way above the limit. By then, they were on the private road to the compound.

Jaune could see moisture in Pyrrha's eyes and that sight made his own sting.

“Beacon was four years of my own, private hell.” Pyrrha murmured. “And seeing Ren today? Being treated in the exact same way by him? It brought it all back. I didn't need just a partner back then, I needed a friend—and confidant. Someone who I could be a normal person with without feeling used or like I had to live up to some ideal the media created out of my image. And I didn't get it.”

Up ahead of them, the gate to the Arc compound recognized them and raised just in time for them to roll in. Despite running on emotional fumes, Pyrrha maneuvered them into the tunnel for the house's underground parking and stopped in the usual spot.

Only when she'd turned off the ignition did Jaune speak. “Pyr... I am so sorry you went through that. Suddenly I've got another reason to wish I'd have gotten into Beacon because maybe then I could have done something to make you not feel like that back then. Although, thinking back, I probably would have died without an unlocked Aura.”

Pyrrha had successfully held back the tears, but they still glistened in her eyes as she looked over at him. “If I had known you back then, I wouldn't have let that happen.”

They gave each other small smiles before Jaune looked away for a moment and pursed his lips in thought. “You know, if we're going to do this thing—this elite hunter thing... it occurs to me that you kinda get a second chance.”
“How so?”

“Well... this time I can promise you that your partner won't be a stiff who isn't there for you.” He turned to her and covered one of her hands—still gripping the wheel—with his own. “This time, I promise you—I swear on Crocea Mors and everything the Arc name stands for—that this time your partner will be your friend and your confidant and anything else you need.”

Beneath his hand, he felt her release the steering wheel and turn her own palm upward so their fingers were intertwined. Though a little surprised, he kept talking. “I never knew the Invincible Girl. The woman I do know is... a truly extraordinary woman who is my assistant, my bodyguard... and my best friend. I never really had one of those myself until we met, so... I guess it's a good thing we wound up to--” again, his better judgment managed to kick in before he said something he imagined he shouldn't, “—running into each other.”

Pyrrha hadn't missed the slip, bit she was too grateful for his other words to complain. Instead, she undid her seat belt and pulled him into a fierce hug. “You have no idea how much everything you just said means to me, Jaune. Thank you so much.”

It didn't take an act of intellect to spur Jaune into returning the hug. “Any time, Pyrrha. And always.”

Chapter End Notes

So that was a thing. Lots of stuff happened here and I'm sure people are going to have a lot of questions.

First off, please don't think to poorly of Ren here. He had a traumatic encounter I'm not even going to pretend is a spoiler here: the childhood friend he 'lost' was, indeed Nora. Why and wherefore she-as-Thor was there in the first place will be revealed later. Point being, he was messed up by that and not having someone to balance his stoic nature. Team PERL was not a happy team. I haven't decided if Rika and Azure will be actual characters or not. I try not to use Ocs unless I have to such as current students and the like.

Also, Pyrrha's backstory. Everyone has to construct this on their own since Pyrrha never talks in detail in canon. Most of the time, it's her dad that's the training freak, but I figured the RWBY universe knows no gender for warriors, so why not have her mom be the warrior of the family?

As for the end of this, is some of that dialog feels familiar, it's because I decided that Jaune being actually romantic instead of flirty would sound sort of like Richard Castle, so I had him say things like calling her extraordinary and using Castle's well-known 'Always'.
The evening of the day after the press conference found Pyrrha sitting up from the adjustable work station Jaune had converted into a makeshift hospital bed in order to swap out the new arc reactor for the old. She had a smock over her that was cut so as to leave only the area of her chest where the magnet had been implanted exposed and looked down to see the sleek, stainless steel plated device flickering away in her chest. Not just Jaune's work this time; she'd helped in its design.

Jaune was across the room from her, furiously washing his hands.

“I thought you said that gunk was a discharge from the device and not pus,” she mused with a single arched eyebrow as the chorus of ‘ews’ coming from his direction continued for a full minute.

He gave her a haughty look over his shoulder. “That doesn't make it not icky.” Then his head tilted and he frowned. It wasn't an unhappy frown, more like the look he got on his face when confronted with a new problem. “Hey Pyrrha? Mind if I ask you a question?”

“Sure.” She slid off the table and made her way over to where her blouse and blazer were hanging off the back of a seat. “Go ahead.”

“Well it's just that I would really rather you not be stuck with that thing forever... couldn't you just use your Semblance to pull the shrapnel out? I mean, your Aura would heal the injury once the foreign matter is out of the way, right?”

She shook her head. “I can't target what I can't see. It's the same reason I was able to be hit by the shrapnel in the first place: it was moving too fast for me to stop.”

“You're unusually chipper for someone who just explained why they'll need a machine to live from now one.” Jaune sounded confused.

Pyrrha just smiled and collected her clothes. “I may not be happy to need the machine, but I trust in it and the hands that built it.” Without another word, she left to get changed.

Watching her disappear up the stairs, Jaune fumbled for a towel to dry his hands off. Then he looked down at the surgical tray resting beside the sink. The miniaturized reactor prototype sat there, still slick with plasmatic discharge. It was a crude device even if it was ahead of its time.

He pondered what to do with it. On the one hand, it held a lot of bad, harrowing memories: the attack on the convoy, being forced to watch as White Fang grunts hauled Pyrrha's unconscious, bleeding body into the cave alongside him while they filmed some ransom tape, assisting Dr. Yinsen with the surgery to install the magnet, and then another to install the reactor itself. They were the stuff of his nightmares.

But at the same time, he was grateful for it. That palm-sized device had saved Pyrrha's life and provided the power for the suit that delivered them from the White Fang. Building off of that suit was offering him the opportunity to get out and fight Grimm like he'd always dreamed.

Plus, constructing its descendant had afforded him the opportunity to spend time with Pyrrha. He hadn't really appreciated how much she'd learned about his own fields of expertise assisting him over the years, but he was highly impressed: she'd even offered a few suggestions that improved
the design by leaps and bounds especially in terms of practical usability.

For one, she suggested the nested, interlocking system that would allow them to switch out the device's core and essential components without having to dig around in her chest cavity anymore. She even designed the extraction tool needed to work the interlock: complicated enough to keep the core form coming out accidentally, but simple enough to be operated in an emergency.

It went without saying that his feelings were mixed when it came to the original miniature arc reactor. His first impulse was to deconstruct it for parts, but at the same time, he couldn't bear to see it destroyed.

"This might seem like a strange question..." Pyrrha's voice called him back from his musings. Had he really been thinking all that time or has she changed that quickly? Unbidden, his eyes quickly scanned her over. He'd expected her to change back into her normal business ensemble, but instead, she was wearing an over-sized sweatshirt with a cartoon Ursa on it and gray sweatpants. The sweatshirt was so big at the neck that it was falling off her shoulder, revealing pale, freckled skin he had to fight to take his eyes off of.

"Um, wha- sure, shoot. What's on your mind?"

His momentary distraction didn't go unnoticed by his assistant, whose lip curled into a slight smirk before her hesitance to ask her question overrode it. "Oh... well I was wondering if I could keep it."

Jaune blinked. "Keep what?"

Pyrrha reached past him to pick up the old reactor, not flinching at all when her hands came into contact with the slick plasmatic discharge still coating the underside. "This. It saved my life after all—I feel like I should keep it in a place of honor or something."

"Y-yeah," said Jaune, "Just let me clean it up for you and you can do whatever you want with it."

She beamed at him. "Thank you, Jaune." Then she turned to him with expectation lighting her eyes. "So. What are we going to do next?"

Here Jaune was back on good footing. Stepping away from her, he directed her gaze to two of the packages he'd had shipped overnight. "Oh, this is gonna be the fun part." With a flourish, he produced a multitool from his pocket and flipped out a knife, which he used to cut open the seals. They opened to reveal two folded pieces of what might have been spandex, covered in white dots.

Pyrrha leaned past him and took one of the objects out of its container. It unfolded into a unitard cut so that it stopped at the wrists and ankles. Just one look told her it would be extremely formfitting—as would its twin, which Jaune was removing from the other box. As much as it made her nervous to think of being seen wearing such a thing by anyone, she was more than happy thinking about seeing Jaune in his... whatever it was.

Oh. Right. She should be asking a question.

"What exactly are these?"

Jaune, oblivious to her thoughts, grinned like a lunatic. "Motion capture suits! Aren't they awesome?"

"I... suppose. But what are they for?"

Once again, Jaune blinked as if he hadn't expected her to not know exactly what was going through his head. "Well in order to design armor that best serves our needs, we'll make full-motion
mannequins of ourselves in the holography suite and design the armor around them. That way we won't run into things like what happened when you tried to sweep that guy in the cave.

Pyrrha involuntarily winced at that memory. Not her finest hour to be true. Then the full weight of what the idea meant set in. "Wait. Do you mean that I will be able to fight as I'm accustomed to in the new armor?"

"That's the idea." Jaune grinned, making her grin in return. "Although I probably should have told you about the mo-cap suits before you just got changed though."

"No worries," she said, suppressing slight annoyance while reminding herself that he wouldn't really be a lovable goof if he didn't goof once in a while—even if it was inconvenient for her, "Should I meet you back here after I chance or..."

"I set up the full-scale assembly area for this," he informed her, still looking over his own suit with childlike joy.

"Alright, I'll see you there."

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The full-scale assembly lab was adjacent to the garage; a place where Jaune could work on prototypes of larger projects at full size. It was as large as the garage, but largely barren when not in use. All the cranes, winches, lifts and other gear was stored in alcoves off to the side, leaving a huge open space in the center.

Pyrrha entered from the door that connected to the normal lab, trying to move with confidence while wearing the skin-tight mo-cap suit. She missed her armor, but found some comfort in the wait of her shield, Akouo on her back and her weapon, Milo in her grasp.

Once, she'd been inseparable from her weapons. As a huntress, they had been her lifeline and livelihood. As a bodyguard who was meant to be some level of subtle, a gleaming bronze shield and a red an bronze sword that became a spear that became a rifle was overkill to the nth degree, so they were relegated to very rare sparring sessions.

She just counted herself lucky that Jaune inexplicably found himself surrounded himself with so many huntresses that she got as many sparring sessions in as she did. Ruby came by at least once a month, sometimes with Yang, Velvet met up with her once or twice in a blue moon, and she'd even crossed swords with Weiss once.

Slightly more often, Jaune would get it in his head on a lazy day off that he wanted to train and don his old training armor and take Crocea Mors off the mantle. As she kept trying to impress upon him, if he got in a couple of hours of that daily, he had the right head for being a good fighter. But the record for consecutive days he'd trained was four thanks to other projects, club openings or just plain poor attention span put an end to it for the next month or two.

This time though... this felt different. He wasn't just playing out his old fantasies of living up to the family name this time. He was motivated. Now it was the project.

Pyrrha would be lying if she said she wasn't looking forward to more consistent training. Hopefully while wearing something that didn't feel like it was only slightly more substantial than a thin sheen of sweat.

A moment later, she was reminded that she wasn't the only one showing off what they'd been gifted.
Jaune had converted the room into a bizarre arena with a green mat covered in white grid lines rolled out on the concrete floor. Said mat was surrounded by tripods holding cameras and sensors, all networked to a holosuite set to record and playback whatever was being filmed. There was also a shipping container sitting at one end of the mat, a forklift parked idle next to it.

It would be nice to suggest she noticed any of that at first. But she did not because at the center of the mat was Jaune Arc, standing with his ancestral sword and shield with the proud, happy expression that said clearly that his mind was one all the work he'd put in to set everything up and not how both ridiculous and revealing the white-spotted, ultra-snug suit he was wearing was.

At least that's what his expression said right up until he laid eyes on Pyrrha dressed in the same. Then his continuance became the very image of concentration as he poured every ounce of his will into looking her in the eye and absolutely not letting his gaze travel south of her chin.

Normally she would sigh internally at that, but she was doing the exact same thing. She'd given up on figuring out how he managed to remain fairly lean and muscled despite living on pizza and restaurant meals-she just learned to be thankful for it.

Plus, she had to imagine with his track record with flirting, he'd learned the hard way not to ogle a woman wielding Dust no matter what she was wearing.

"Um... hi." Jaune said a bit too quickly. "Ready?"

Pyrrha decided to put her thoughts into the project and finally gave their arena a once over. "So... we're just going to spar so the computer can capture it?"

"Yep. And hold nothing back. We need to see the full extent of your range of motion in combat and get a good idea of what you'll need the armor to do."

She pursed her lips. "If I go all out against you... you might die." No point in candy coating it. They'd had some good sparring sessions, but in an all-out fight, Jaune could fight her in much the same way a paper doll might fight a chipper shredder.

"Oh don't I know it." There wasn't a hint of shame in his tone. He was even chuckling a little. "Plus, I mean, we're supposed to work together, do the capture should focus on how we work together too. Luckily, I has something brought out of storage just for this occasion."

He whipped out his scroll and tapped it a few time. The doors on the shipping container started to open. Sensing that nothing nice and fuzzy was going to come out of there, Pyrrha shifted Milo to spear mode and raised Akouo. "What exactly did you get out of storage?"

Jaune gave an awkward laugh as he aped her, readying his shield and sliding into a passable defensive stance. "You know how my first real contract was providing Beacon with training drones?"

"I alone probably made you a few million lien in my third year," Pyrrha replied with a grin. By the time the Arc Industries drones were introduced, the staff had caught on to her habit of issuing challenges to multiple opponents whenever she was feeling upset or alone and tried to direct her energies into the drones instead of fellow students. That proved to be an expensive prospect.

Another awkward laugh made her feel slightly nervous. Jaune usually laughed like that about thirty seconds before something exploded. "Yeah, well these were part of the first run. Ozpin rejected them."
"They weren't good enough?"

"Actually, he said they were a bit too extreme for training purposes."

That made her give him a sidelong look. "Professor Ozpin? The man who, during my initiation in the first year of Beacon launched my entire class into the Emerald Forest from the Beacon Cliffs to hunt for relics without a map or even rough description of the objective? I had multiple lacerations from a Giant Nevermore's pinions. My entire team had to do battle with four King Taijus. What could these robots possibly do to make him think they were too extreme?"

The container was fully opened now, and five vaguely humanoid robots emerged. Their bodies and limbs were extremely thick and their metal carapaces were crisscrossed with glowing lines that could only be Dust circuits of varying colors.

As the first stepped forward, it flexed its arms out to the sides and the air around it turned to fog before freezing to its body as a thick armor of ice. Behind it, the next started extending pylons which began to crackle and arc with yellow electricity that made the air hum. The next extended wings and took to the air and the fourth opened its faceplate to reveal a furnace of hellfire where eyes would be on a human. Finally, the fifth flared in a nimbus of green energy and the mat under its feet started to blister.

"That was during my phase of experimenting with just how far I could go with Dust circuits," said Jaune. "Plus the girl I had working with me to activate the Dust was kind of hot and I wanted to impress her, so I might have made them a little too hardcore."

The Arc Compound garage was, for the most part, a museum to conspicuous consumption. In the first few years after becoming wealthy, Jaune bought a lot of classic or at least novel cars. In addition to the import he usually drove, there were examples of automotive technology dating all the way back to the closing days of the Great War, including the staff car of one of the leaders of the faunus uprising. At the time, Jaune didn't really care what he was buying as long as it was expensive and might impress the ladies.

The past three years had seen fewer additions to the collection, owing in no small part to fewer drunken nights with an internet connection and a bottomless credit card. Now the place was usually quiet unless a car was coming or going.

Or, as was the case this time, the wall was exploding in a flash of red light as said red light punched a screaming body in a black bodysuit with white dots all over it straight though it in a cloud of pulverized concrete and hubris.

Jaune Arc lived up to his name in making a graceful arcing path before slamming into the side of a vintage sedan. To his credit, his shield was still up as he groaned and pitched forward to the ground with a thud.

Moments later, another section of the wall erupted and the winged robot came through, grappling with a similarly-dressed figure. It managed to maneuver itself so it wouldn't be the one landing on the bottom when it was suddenly sheathed in a haze of black energy and forced to flip to the bottom position just before impact. Its wings sheared off, one leg exploded into sparks and it slammed into a support pillar at around forty miles an hour, which spelled its end while also catapulting its opponent through the air.

Pyrrha Nikos hit the same sadan Jaune had, leaving an even larger dent. Instead of pitching
forward, she slid down the ruined side of the car until she landed heavily on her rump beside her boss-slash-partner. Her vision was swimming, so she merely closed her eyes and moaned for a second. After a few moments, she gasped out, "Alright. I will give you this: I, at least, am impressed."

Chapter End Notes

Just a little confirmation that Dust is still incredibly effective. Jaune just doesn't use it because he thinks it's a finite resource. Also, the idea that Jaune would build ridiculously lethal robots to impress a girl amused me.

I'll take a moment to point out that they made several mini-reactors here unlike Tony Stark, who just made the one spare. Second rule of engineering: redundancy is your friend. I'll promise you right now: the old reactor isn't going to be a checkov's gun in this story. Other stuff in this chapter will though!

So this is the start of a mini-arc called REQUIRE, which is going to be a fun montageala the Iron Man movie of developing the first generation armors. Also we'll catch back up with Nora and Ren and Cinder.
After a break to drastically re-calibrate the difficulty settings on the surviving drones, they finally got clean motion captures of their fighting styles. These were, in turn, represented by a miniature Jaune and a miniature Pyrrha standing in the center of Jaune's holographic autoCAD.

Pyrrha leaned in to give them a closer inspection. Once Jaune filled in the wireframes, they were perfect little likenesses that, on command, could replicate their fighting moves with a full range of motion. She couldn't help but grin. “This might be an odd question, but...”

“You're wondering if I can fabricate these?” Jaune asked, eyebrows rising as he looked up from reading over the dimensions the autoCAD was returning. He gave her a teasing look, “does someone want a little Pyrrha action figure for her desk?”

She would have felt embarrassed f not for the fact that she was now sure the same idea had gone through his head too. “You have to admit they're adorable.”

“I was gonna say 'cool', but that works too. Also yes. I don't have a rack of sixty-thousand lien rapid fabricators to not use them to make my own action figures.” Jaune leaned back in his seat and looked up—a wholly unnecessary gesture she was sure was born from his love of old sci-fi shows and movies. “Glynda, could you send these to fabrication. Finish and paint two sets in high density polyurethane, please.”

“As you wish. Shall I also put in an order for sugary breakfast cereal and foot pajamas?”

Why Jaune programmed his house to be sarcastic, Pyrrha would never know. Why he'd given it the voice of one of Beacon's most infamous instructors similarly eluded her. When pressed, Jaune always said it was because he responded better to a strong, female voice and blushed profusely.

After all those years, she had learned to play along, however. “Anything but Pumpkin Pete's, please Glynda.”

As the two humans shared a laugh, Glynda muttered, “I am going to choose to ignore that.”

When they finally got over their mirth, Jaune reached into the holographic display and slid the tiny Jaune aside. Then he pinched mini-Pyrrha about the shoulders and when he brought his fingers apart, the little image expanded to about two feet in height.

“So,” he began. “Like I said before, you're pretty... um.. flexible.” He glanced away, “A-and you fight like it. Lots of range of motion and bendiness. Solid plates aren't going to cut it. So what I'm thinking is...” Withdrawing his hand from the display, he tapped on his scroll, causing a series of green lines to encase the holo-Pyrrha; a series of cables lined to each other via hard points around the joints. “Artificial muscles covered in smaller interlocking plates that move over each other, backed by chain mail”

A few more taps caused those elements to be displayed in red and yellow respectively. The result had a rigid breastplate with a socket for the arc reactor, articulated plates over the abdomen, over the forearms, biceps, thighs and shins, the joints protected by woven rings of metal attached to the internal skeleton of cables. Armored boots, pauldrons over the shoulders, and a skull-like helmet completed the image.
“What do you think?”

Pyrrha reached into the display and rotated holo-her around to face her. After a few minutes of tilting her head and humming thoughtfully, she said, “Maybe I'm being kind of vain here, but it's kind of... mannish, don't you think?”

This caused Jaune to make a face like someone just put a gun to his back and demanded he walk a tightrope. “Well I mean... er... see I could give the suit a literal 'breast' plate, but the shape would concentrate blows to the chest on your sternum—and also the reactor.

She nodded. “I get that. But maybe the mask can be a little... stylized?” Mirroring his actions unconsciously, she looked up. “Glynda, can you pull up some masks? Specifically those that look like a female face?”

“You two do ask the most useful things of my vast intellectual resources.” Glynda replied, but the holo-display expanded upward to show a series of images, mostly from museums, slowly scrolling horizontally to reveal more all the time.

“There.” Pyrrha stabbed out a finger to stop the scrolling on a plaster mask from a stage play about some old Mistralian goddesses. The datatab that opened up beside it revealed that it was a depiction of the goddess Minerva—highly fitting.

Jaune reached into the display and took hold of the mask’s image, dragging it down to the armored holo-Pyrrha and mapping its image over the helmet. The autoCAD took a few moments to sculpt the mask’s shape into the helmet. Still Jaune looked at it dubiously. Then he went back to his scroll and tapped in a few commands. A mane of metal quills sprouted out of the helmet to wreath the mask’s face like wild hair. Pyrrha shot him a confused look.

“It's functional,” Jaune said half-defensively, “If we make each of those quills out of some sort of ferrous metal and magnetically detachable...”

A slow smile spread across her face. “A head full of surprise back-up weapons.” Then the smile grew. “But if we do that, we could go farther in adding things. The new arc reactor produces five times the power of the original. That means we can build in all sorts of extras.” Her eyes sparkled as she added, “Plus, it'll be fun coming up with new ideas.”

As it turned out—unsurprisingly since invention was the source of his fortune—Jaune was the first one to come up with an fabricate a prototype for a new innovation: a set of boots mounted with repulser systems in the heels.

Pyrrha sat in the deep, padded seat next to the holo-display and read from his notes attached to the file where the design of the new components were stored. “Repulser-Assisted Jump? You used repulsers to lift satellites into space—couldn't you just fly outright?”

For her trouble, she received a blank stare. “Pyrrha? Have you forgotten who you're talking to? Even if I could come up with a system to stabilize a human shape in flight, I'm not subjecting myself to that torture.”

“But maybe your airsickness has more to do with the motion of a craft: no craft, no problem,” she offered.

Jaune made a face. “And if there is a problem, I barf into a helmet instead of a trash can. You're not making a very good case.”
“You could always take the pills,” she teased lightly, sing-songing the words.

“I could just take a belt of whiskey whenever I get into the suit.” Jaune sing-songed back, earning a sour look from Pyrrha.

She folded her arms. “Well I want to fly if we can make it work.”

Jaune pressed his lips into a thin line and she knew his mind was already dissecting the problem and working up theories. Aloud, he said, “Let's see if we can jump before we can fly. Glynda, give me a distance marker please.” He bent to close the prototype boots over his feet, ankles and calves.

For safety, he'd laid out six-inch thick pads in the full-scale assembly lab out to a distance to fifty feet. Projectors positioned overhead displayed the precise distances across the mounds of pads with a start pad at the end nearest the holo-display. Jaune took his mark there.

“Alright...” he muttered into the headset he was using in lieu if his scroll, “Dial in the repulsers at, say, ten percent thrust. I'm gonna take five running steps, then fire the repulsers for a jump. Dummy?”

There was a series of digital beeps and a rolling drone—the same one Pyrrha had helped put together her first week of work as Jaune's bodyguard—rolled over to the half-way point with a fire extinguisher in its single manipulator.

“Right. Fire control. Pyrrha, got the first aid kit?”

“I'm hoping were don't have to use it,” she replied holding up the plain, white box with a prominent red cross painted on it. Then her attention returned to the specs for the boots and frowned. Something wasn't adding up and she couldn't quite put her finger on it from just reading the numbers.

“Ready...”

She considered telling Jaune about her misgivings, but seeing as she didn't fully understand what was wrong, she decided he must have known what he was doing, so she held her peace.

“Set...”

But something still nagged at her. The thrust output numbers for the repulsers seemed mighty small for something that propelled warheads. Idly, she called up the specs on the repulser tech itself.

Horror started to dawn on her in slow motion. For everything he was, Jaune Arc was a human. A human who made mistakes. Like putting a decimal point in the wrong place while transcribing specifications. By the time she opened her mouth, he was already in motion.

“Go!” Jaune took off and fired the repulsers at ten percent thrust—when he should have fired them at one percent.

To his credit, it looked impressive as he was hurled into the on a column of blue light. For a second, he must have thought everything was going according to plan, as he let out a triumphant whoop... right before he smacked face first into one of the steel beams that served as rafters for the full-scale assembly lab. Tumbling end over end, he crashed to the floor on his back... fifteen feet beyond the end of the line of mats.

Pyrrha cringed, thankful once again that she'd unlocked his aura because otherwise, he would have
been in traction for weeks.

“So let me get this straight.” Jaune was eyeing Pyrrha warily. They were outside on the lawn of the Arc compound under and overcast sky. This time Pyrrha was wearing the prototype jump boots as well as her contribution to the project, a pair of gauntlets with their own integrated repulsers. All four limbs were now wired into her personal arc reactor with said wires duct taped down across her body.

“You watch me break my nose trying those things out yesterday, had to reset it for me personally, aaaand now you want to give it a try. Am I accurate int hat statement.”

Pyrrha folded her arms. “I told you I want to fly if we can make that happen. Besides, now we know ten percent is much, much too high, plus I ran the simulations and the gloves should let me stabilize myself. And if that doesn't work, I still have my semblance to save myself.”

He gave her a dubious look, but nonetheless tapped some commands into his scroll. “Just making sure. I've got the first aid kit ready. Dummy? You a go?” The little robot replied in what was probably the affirmative. “Okay then. Good luck Pyr. We're go for one percent.”

She tried to give him a confident smile, but the truth was, she was incredibly nervous. The gloves were her first solo design and she wasn't completely sure they weren't going to explode immediately upon her firing them up. But Jaune gave him the count down and on zero, she fired up all four repulser units. Blue bursts erupted from her feet and palms, lifting her into the air inch by painstaking inch.

Using the finger controls, she gave them both more power and her ascension speed up... as did her instability. Trying to move her palms fractionally to compensate for her slowly tilting trajectory only made her tilt wildly in the other direction, at which point she over-corrected and suddenly found herself arrowing across the lawn uncontrollably. No matter how she twisted or turned, she could get herself back upright and soon found herself on a collision course with Jaune.

Panicked, she did the only thing she could think of to brake and threw her palms up in front of her, giving them more power in the hopes of stopping. Except in her confusion, she reset the gauntlets to fire a burst instead of a continual thrust. There was a sound like an old fashioned camera's flash powering up and then twin pulses of blue light flared out in front of her.

Every action has an equal and opposite reaction, so she ended up somersaulting across the lawn with the boots still going at one percent thrust while Jaune ended up landing somewhere near the gazebo.

“So.” Jaune was sitting at his workbench in the main lab about half an hour later, watching the bruise that covered his entire upper body and face slowly fade via a reflection in the glass door while at the same time winding an ace bandage around Pyrrha's broken wrist so it would heal right. “You can fly. We'll have to rework the entire suit for computer-assisted stabilization, but you can totally fly.”

“I just want to say I'm sorry again for... um.. repulsing you.”

Jaune held up his hand. “No, no. We learned a valuable lesson from this.”

“Whoever is running the diagnostics needs to behind a ballistic shield from now on?”
“Okay, two things. I was talking about the fact I’m not mangled from taking a repulser blast to the face: the forces is widely distributed over my entire body—which means the repulsers can make really good less-lethal weapons!”

Pyrrha brightened at that. She'd been wondering how exactly she was going to make her Milo, a gun that was also a slashing and stabbing implement 'less lethal'.

Once again, Jaune seemed to read her mind. “Speaking of weapons... there's another problem we need to address.” There was an abundance of hesitation in his voice and he avoided making eye contact.

Confusion and concern vied for position at the top of Pyrrha's mind. What could possibly have him acting like that around her? Especially when it came to something like weapons tech. “What problem?” She finally asked, “Is something wrong, Jaune?”

“N-not exactly. It's just that I know it's a touchy subject for you.” She had no idea what he was talking about and so only continued to stare at him questioningly. After a few seconds of this, he broke. “It's about you being famous and stuff, okay? Four years as Mistral Champion, four more being a finalist in the Vytal Tournament and Beacon's top grad. Sure you've been kind of off the radar for the past five years, Pyr, but with the kidnapping, you're back in the news again and... people are gonna recognize if the new armored huntress is using Milo and Akouo.”

At the mention of her isolated past, her eyes had started to glaze over, but by the end, her attention had snapped back in full. “Oh. I never thought of it like that. Hmm.” She pressed a finger to her lips and pondered the issue. “You know, you aren't excluded from that yourself. You might have never been a hunter, but people know the Arc Family crest when they see it—like on Crocea Mors's shield component?”

“So we're both going to need new weapons,” Jaune concluded. “I've got to admit, I'm already excited about the idea of having a weapon that turns into a gun like everyone else. Oh, maybe a sword that turns into a rail gun! Or a warhammer that's also a pile bunker.”

“A pile bunker?”

“It's like a cannon that shoots a huge spike only the spike stays connected to the gun. It can punch through stuff, anchor you to the ground—it's a super-versatile kind of weapon.”

“That sounds... nice.”

Jaune frowned at the distance in her tone. “Something wrong?”

His words seemed to shake her out of a daze. Pyrrha shook her head and blinked at him. “Sorry. I was just trying to remember any other weapons I've fought with besides a Xiphos, spear and shield. I mean I've been using the same basic weapons for almost fifteen years now.”

With deft fingers, Jaune started searching weapons databases. “Does it have to be a Xiphos and that kind of spear?”

“I suppose not. I mean there would need to be an adjustment, but... wouldn't that be too similar still?”

A twinkle appeared in Jaune's eyes as his mind ran through the possibilities. “Not if it's different enough in style. Hey, how about instead of a rifle, we make it turn into a plasma cannon?”

That got Pyrrha's undivided attention. “A plasma cannon, seriously? Even for powered armor
weaponry, that sounds like overkill.”

Jaune grinned a huge grin. “You're not getting the best part about this idea, Pyrrha. You know how you keep plasma isolated and controlled? How you direct it?”

Her eyes widened. She had in fact just recently read an article about it. “Magnetic fields.”

The grin reached critical levels. “Think of the possibilities.”

Chapter End Notes

Guess who just recently watched Spider-man 2 again? It turns out that plasma conduits are indeed controlled by magnetic fields. They even address this in Iron Man 2, since this is how Whiplash's weapons work. So giving Pyrrha something that generates plasma is like giving her a Green Lantern Ring if the ring's constructs were all on nuclear fire.

People are going to get on me for focusing on Pyrrha's armor her, but next chapter will show that Jaune's been taking into account all the lessons they've learned building hers... and overbuilding the crap out of it. By the way, the 'wreath of spines' thing on her armor along with the goddess-sculpt mask? That's the Lady of Pain from the Planescape D&D setting. I figured it would look badass.

Anyway, we'll finally get to see the Mk 2 armors next time as Our Heroes blast into action on their first mission.
It was a lazy night at the Arc compound. Just the night before, they had finished the final designs for the Mk 2 armors and sent the files to the fabrication 'shed' (Jaune's term). By the time all was said and done, it had gone past two in the morning and they were both too tired to celebrate, heading off to their respective rooms to sleep.

The following day had been devoted to loading all the armor pieces into the 'wardrobe' (also Jaune's term) system, which would assemble to powered armor around them when the time came. Then Jaune set Glynda to monitor news and CCT traffic for criminal or Grimm activity that might serve as a good live test for the new armors.

And then and only then did the celebration begin.

Only it was just the two of them and they both had to keep things a secret from the public, so said celebration turned out to be champagne, Pyrrha's favorite Mistralian take-out and a marathon of Jaune's favorite show. Such was the art of compromise.

And so the late evening found the two sharing a couch, Pyrrha at one end with her legs tucked underneath her body, enjoying the last few bites of her manicotti while Jaune returned from the kitchen with a bowl of popcorn, his gyro long since eaten.

The bowl went into the space between them and Pyrrha saw it as blocking off any opportunity she might have had to migrate across the couch to sit closer to her erstwhile partner, maybe 'fall asleep' leaning against him like she had while buzzed on their fateful flight to Vacuo.

Not that she would do that sober—and the champagne was nowhere near strong enough to change that. No, she had no intention of pushing any boundaries. Not then... maybe not ever. After all, Jaune wasn't just a friend, he was her boss even if it never felt like it. Even if she was willing to risk their friendship following through on her fondness for him, her livelihood would also be at stake if she made a pass and things went south.

So she kept herself right where she was—in more ways than one, and watched the screen. To tell the truth, she enjoyed the show almost as much as Jaune (though she wouldn't have tried to buy the rights to save it from cancellation like he had). Now, however, they had gone through the original short run of the series and were watching the movie. And the movie just bothered her.

“What exactly was the point of killing off the pilot? Or the priest for that matter?” She groused, watching the last stretch with a heavy scowl.

Jaune looked more sad than upset as he shrugged and grabbed up a handful of popcorn. “The creator says it was to make the audience worried for the rest of the cast on the commentary. I don't get the point of that when you're killing off the literal best characters through.”

“I know,” she continued, “And there are better ways to create tension and suspense. It just feels... mean spirited and kind of takes me out of the whole thing.”

He nodded, taking time to chew and swallow the popcorn he'd just stuff in his mouth. “At least most creators only do it once or twice. This guy does it all the time! I guess at least he didn't maim anyone, I guess.” He was about to say something else when Glynda interrupted.
“Requested Alert: the town of Sienna Crossroads has sent an emergency request for aid. The city wall has been breached and Grimm have entered the town proper. Original communique sent from Howard Ivy, vice-Mayor to Vale Hunter's Lodge and Beacon Academy. Beacon responding. A team of first year students and a supervising Hunter will be dispatched within the hour.”

Jaune perked up, turning to look at Pyrrha. “We can get there way sooner than an hour.”

The mood she’d been sinking into thanks to the movie and its caviler treatment of likable characters evaporated in an instant. “Indeed, I believe we can.”

They both leapt from the couch and headed down to the lab. Along the way, Jaune relayed orders for Glynda to ready the armors, check local air traffic, and position an Arc Industries tracking satellite to keep an eye on Sienna Crossroads.

The wardrobe room was a sectioned-off space in the lab adjacent to the garage where they’d built the system for assembling the armor around them. While not in use, it was just a big, empty room with an aluminum floor sporting a pair of painted circles: on red, one blue, each with a pair of footprints stamped in the center.

Having just spent an hour that day practicing the maneuver, the pair went to their respective circles and stepped into the footprints, raising their chins and extending their arms out to the sides. Sensors in the room detected such actions and it began to whir to life.

The floor opened up beneath them and racks holding armor parts on robotic arms emerged. The footprints beneath their feet also blossomed open and the components of their boots began to come together around their feet.

It was a surreal experience, at least for Pyrrha, to feel the machines locking pieces onto her body. The ring-like control nodes for the artificial muscles came first, followed by struts and cables and then the chain and finally layers of plate.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Jaune's assembly taking place as well: his armor coming in bigger, more solid pieces that had to be bolted together around him. She had her doubts about that thing: it was three times his bulk and armored better than a tank despite them already knowing their aura would augment whatever armor they were wearing.

Whatever positives she might have to say in his defense, she was keenly and painfully aware of his lack of confidence, especially when it came to combat ability. The end result was an over-build that needed forty percent of an arc reactor 2.0's output just to move. That was a ton of missed potential and she hoped he wouldn't pay the price for it.

Then her vision was temporarily obscured entirely as the helmet was closed around her head. She felt slight pressure as the armor interfaced with the rector embedded in her chest and then the screen came to life. At first, there was just a view of the wardrobe room through her 'eyes'. Then that screen was surrounded by more: showing diagnostics, power levels, system checks, even altitude and targeting reticules for her palm repulsers.

Finally, words scrolled across her view. 'Armor OS 1.6. 'Hematite' all systems nominal'.

Hematite was the pseudonym they'd come up for her elite huntress persona should anyone ask. Jaune had suggested Iron Woman. She'd politely declined. He wasn't the best at naming things.

The racks retracted, leaving the two of them standing fully armored in the wardrobe room. The system had even attached their weapons for them.
The armor and its heeled boots boosted Pyrrha up to almost seven feet tall. The initial design with the overlapping plates had largely remained the same, though more of the plates had become articulated as flight surfaces now. The primary color was red with bronze accents along her ribs, gauntlets and greaves. Her mask was completely bronze with red-glowing sensors in the eye sockets. It glinted off the bronze-colored, iron-cored spines that rose in a savage mane around her head.

Beside her, Jaune's armor—which he was calling The Scarab resembled a humanoid turtle. Thick arms and legs painted black joined with an articulated chest and abdominal section in white. The arms sported strange rails along the backs of them that seemed capable of locking into place. The head was a fearsome, blocky skull, the seem that closed over Jaune's face forming a robotic scowl set off by the blue lights from the sensors in the eyes.

The turtle comparison—and the 'Scarab' moniker came from the huge 'shell on the back. It looked like a pentagon with the top point pounded down so as to almost be flat. Seven repulsers lined the bottom edge of the strange device, glowing softly blue.

For whatever reason, Jaune had painted stylized sunbursts on the back of the shell and on the heavy pauldrons over his shoulders.

"Ready?" Pyrrha started as Jaune's normal voice came over the comm-link while it also emerged from the Scarab's speakers in a deep, distorted rumble.

"Are you sure that hulk can fly?" she asked, teasingly. Her own speakers somehow made it sound like a husky-voice threat. Hematite was apparently a femme fatale.

He hunched forward and lit off the his seven-repulser array. "Science says it can."

"Then lets got." Pyrrha fires her boot repulsers, then those in her palms. Thanks to the computer control over the outputs, she lifted off smoothly and lifted off through the panel that irised open above them. There was a godawful roar and Jaune followed, the Scarab lit up in blue as seven repulsers worked in tandem to lift it bulk into the sky.

Pyrrha prayed they would never have to go on a stealth mission.

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As it turned out, flying without some plane swaying under your feet and bouncing around in turbulence... was awesome. Jane let out a whoop only to cut off when he remembered that he'd set up the comm-link to be always open unless specifically shut off. "...Sorry."

"What for? Now you understand why I was so excited to fly!" Pyrrha's laughing voice came in over the system. A pop-up map indicated that she was above him and to his ten o'clock position.

Hearing her, sounding so joyful and carefree, brought a smile to his face. Pyrrha was always so subdued and in control, even when being playful. It made him feel a swell of pride that something he—no they—built was making her feel that way. It surprised him that it was almost a bigger deal to him than what they were flying toward: fulfilling his blood right as an Arc by fighting the Grimm.

"Y-yeah," he replied. "I've gotta admit, you were right!"

"Of course I was!" Pyrrha dropped down into his plane of motion and did a barrel roll with her arms out to her sides. The Scarab didn't have enough control surfaces to pull that off without losing momentum, so he chose instead to throttle up alongside her as his 'trick'.

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“And I told you the Scarab could fly!”

There was a cheerful note of challenge in her voice when she came back with. “Then the real question is how it fights.”

“We'll see in a few minutes. Sienna Crossroads coming up on our... two o'clock in three minutes.”

It was only then that he remembered something that had been nagging at his curiosity since hearing about the attack. He quickly connected to his home network and asked, “Glynda, see if you can find any possible inciting incidents at Sienna Crossroads.”

Ever since Pyrrha shared her theory with him years back; about how the Grimm around Menagerie might have larger and more aggressive because of the effect of institutional discrimination on the Faunus populace; Jaune had been looking deeper into the relationship between Grim and aggregate sapient emotions.

'Instigating events' were one phenomenon that emerged in his studies. Accidents, tragedies, even massive disappointments on a town-wide scale seemed to herald Grimm attacks—or attract them more likely. Not all attacks had a corresponding instigating event, but those that did tended to be larger, contain more powerful Grimm, and last longer.

Grimm didn't just cause human suffering. They were attracted to it.

“One possible result,” Glynda reported back, “Two days ago, the wife of the Mayor of Sienna Crossroads suffered a psychotic break. She slew her husband—and two children.”

Jaune took a shuddering breath and temporarily muted his comm-link Pyrrha didn't need to hear that or his reaction just before going into battle. “Dust, that's awful. This is going to be bad, isn't it, Glyn?”

“Look-down satellite is not within sufficient range to attain an accurate count of Grimm or civilians on the ground. Preliminary estimates number one hundred Grimm at least, mostly beowolves and ursas.”

“Nothing smaller?”

“Those would not show up at this range.”

“Right.” he switch the comm-link back on. “Pyr? Glynda is checking the sats. Looks like we've got around a hundred beowolves and ursas.”

There was a long pause. “That's a lot. Back at Beacon, we would fight that number with four-man teams.” She hummed a little under her breath, then added, “But that was without powered armor or high-tech weaponry. Shall we?”

Behind his helmet, he cracked a smile. “How about you clear a way for me?”

She gave a musical laugh and reached behind her back. “On it b... partner.”

Out came Hanashite. Jaune had wanted to call it the Ferrous Fang, but he'd been overruled. As Milo and Akouo were 'speak' and 'listen' in western Mistrali, so too were Pyrrha's new weapon and shield Hanashite and Kiku in the dialect of the Northern Islands of Vacuo from which they'd drawn the nagimaki design of Hanashite's spear mode. It had been Jaune's intention for the sword mode to be a katana, but the necessary components for the plasma cannon required the blade to be falchion-sized.
Below them, Sienna Crossroads appeared. Like many of the close-in villages around Vale, it featured beautiful yet highly regimented architecture. Lines of stone buildings extended from the town hall like spokes from a wheel with fountains at major intersections. It wasn't for the ten-foot walls, it would have been hard to tell those people were under siege by monsters.

A crack had appeared in those walls however, and Grimm boiled through it like an infection from a wound. Something had smashed through both the wall and an adjacent guard tower. Several buildings near the breach had collapsed.

If he didn't know that Grimm swallowed their prey whole after injuring them, Jaune would have been heartened to see a lack of bodies on the ground. As it was, he did take solace in the fact that the Grimm didn't seem to be going for any of the other houses save one, congregating instead around the town hall with its reinforced steel doors.

Pyrrha saw the knots of beasts hammering on the doors too, but also the grouping around one of the stone houses. There was a beowolf with its head inside one of the windows. “Jaune, I think you're going to have to make your own landing space.”

“I see it too,” he agreed. “Go get 'em.”

She didn't need more encouragement to peel off and make for the besieged house. Just above the heads of the monsters assailing the place, she leaned back and came to a hover, swinging Hanashite. With a pneumatic hiss, the hilt expanded the blade into spear mode, granting her the reach to behead the creature with its head in the window with one swing and continue on the take the arm off another.

With her free hand, Pyrrha poured repulser blasts into the Grimm nearest the door and walls, driving them back enough for her to drop down and land among them. Jaune lost sight of her then—but not the flying black, bone-plated limbs and dark miasma from dying Grimm.

Then it was his turn. Jaune couldn't draw his weapon out while in flight (it hadn't occurred to him he'd have to—he had ranged weapons to deal with aerial Grimm. With no other way to open up space for himself, Jaune simply hovered over the space in front of the door—and cut power to the repulsers.

Over a quarter ton of metal was too much for the beowolves and immature ursas at the main doors; they were literally crushed underneath his heels, their bodies becoming black smoke that lent a sinister air to the looming powered armor.

While his suit resembled a dour demon called from the depths of Tartarus, inside Jaune was grinning like a little kid as he extended his right arm. The rails on the back of the arm aligned with a similar rail on the inside of the Scarab's 'shell'. A drive chain dragged said 'shell' off the rack attached to the armor's spine and set it in place on the armor's forearm, making the inside edge with it single gleaming pile bunker and battery of repulsers briefly visible before Jaune swung the arm around as a tower shield.

“No one's getting in here.” He announced via the speakers, his voice carrying out into the Grimm-filled plaza. Then he triggered the pile bunker. An upward-facing repulser fired, slamming a six-inch diameter spike into the concrete patio of the town hall, transforming the tower shield into an immovable object. Sensors along the front of the shield instantly allowed Jaune to see as if there was nothing in front of him at all.
Then it was time to show the world his weapon. Reaching back, he took hold of the thick pistol-grip hilt and drew it out: Guillotine. With a series of ratcheting clanks and sharp sounds, the great sword unfolded to its full seven-foot length.

For all Pyrrha's teasing (or grousing) about his choice to over-build his armor, even Jaune had to admit that Guillotine was overcompensating. In his defense, the blade had to be that long to form the magnetic 'track' for his railgun. And if you were going that far, why not give it a pistol mode that fired white phosphorus rounds?

And of course, there was the sword itself, which lived up to its name immediately as he swung it into the crowd of Grimm. Well... mostly. The more mature beowolves and all the ursa were too tall to be beheaded perse, but bisecting them at chest level still counted for something.

A press of his palm and a small engine caused the buried pile bunker to rotate, allowing him more reach while keeping one side of his body covered. More and more Grimm—the anathema that stalked humanity, the personifications of anonymity—fell to his blade.

In that moment, he felt he knew what it was to truly be a son of Arc. No longer was he the goofy comic relief, the eccentric rich man who everyone loved to poke fun of in the tabloids but for all his riches, never wanted to be... or be with. He was the Hero, the Slayer of Monsters. Like his father. Like this grandfather and his father before him.

He heard himself laughing like a maniac and was glad he'd shut off the speaker feed.

“Enjoying yourself?”

But not the comm-link

The laughter cut off in an implosion of self-awareness. “He-he... sorry.”

“I don't blame you,” she replied. “I honestly forgot how much I missed this. The rush, the satisfaction... it's exhilarating.”

“You can say that again.” Jaune was trying not to burst out into mad laughter again. He'd actually run out of Grimm to kill on his left side, and so retracted the pile bunker so he could swing around to the right. In the process, he shield-bashed a beowolf almost as big as his armor to the ground. A huge ursa, heavily armored in bone plates and spikes loomed up to take its place.

An Alpha. Time to up his game.

Hitting a hidden trigger, he caused Guillotine to fold back up into pistol mode and swung it around to point the dual barrels at the monster's chest before letting the creature have it. A pair of flaming,white-hot holes appeared in the ursa's chest and it fell back, the flames already consuming it.

Jaune had to pause at that one. He'd set a giant, evil bear on fire.

Cool.

“Seismic event?” He heard Pyrrha mutter. Then louder, she added, “Jaune, why does the suit have a seismic monitor?”

A good question, he thought. It was really a just-in-case thing he'd put in at the last minute. In his research on Grimm, he'd come across on a report by a Bartholomew Oobleck, a hunter and scholar who theorized that some larger Grimm had developed the ability to burrow beyond just covering
up in loose dirt like some of the opportunistic Grimm did, which explained in part what happened to the final, underground survivors of the lost Vale expansion of Mountain Glenn.

It was just about that time that he asked a question he probably should have when they arrived: among a horde of beowolves and ursas, most of them juveniles (or at a larval stage? No one understood the Grimm life cycle)... what broke through the wall and collapsed the buildings?

He called up the look-down images from the satellite, and there it was: the collapsed buildings hadn't been knocked over... they had fallen into a collapsed tunnel. A freshly dug tunnel.

“Pyrrha! Fly up! Fly up now!”

It was already too late. The ground beneath where he'd last seen Pyrrha exploded as the biggest Deathstalker he'd ever seen surfaced.

Chapter End Notes

I don't normally write cliffhangers, but this was getting long and there's a big, big fight, some other characters, and a cliffhanger I actually intended coming up and it was going to be twenty pages if I didn't stop.

The name 'The Scarab' is a reference to the Blue Beetle, who is voiced in Batman: the Brave and the Bold by Wil Fredle, who also voices Ron Stoppable, another goofily endearing blonde dork with a much more capable and hot redhead partner. I actually thought Jaune was voiced by Fredle when I first saw the show and there has to be some Ron DNA in his concept. The only difference is that his 'Kim' actually tried to help him improve instead of using him as bait for 50+ episodes :p. I kid, I kid.

And yes, I am still bitter about Serenity. You can imagine how I then felt about Vol 3 Ep 12. Like as an actual writer who has to think about these things—not even as a fan of these characters, I was bothered, even a little offended. But as a comic book fan, especially a fan of X-men, I'm no stranger to valuable characters being thrown away for no reason. Synch, Jean Grey, Skin, the Vale sisters, Jean Grey, Quill, Rubber Maid, Wither, Jean Grey again, Icarus... -sigh- At least Serenity and RWBY didn't kill 30+ kids because they 'didn't know what to do with them', I guess. RIP Academy X.

Anyway, I finally get back to writing some action. I hope you guys enjoyed it because it was a ton of fun to write. Also, it was fun having Jaune learn all the wrong lessons here—he's killed thousands of times more Grimm with Helios that he ever could with the Scarab and Guillotine.

Oh, someone said there's another fic where someone has a sword railgun. That's awesome.
Pyrrha thought it would be like slipping on an old, comfortable sweater, like getting back into step with a dance you've missed performing after years away. Not long after she hit the ground between the encroaching Grimm and the house they were attacking, she learned she had been wrong.

It was better.

As much as she would protest about the nobility of a hunter's duty, how they existed to protect the people and the world... she'd always secretly just plain enjoyed fighting. Tournaments, Grimm, sparring partners, drones—it didn't matter. Pyrrha Nikos had always seen herself as a shrinking violet in social situations that blossomed in the heat of battle.

And with the armor and her new weapons, she finally was exactly what they'd called her when she merely won a few regional tournaments: Invincible. Hanashite clove through three beowolves at once, the incredible strength the artificial muscles lent her meaning the blade barely slowed down while tearing through them. Whipping the sword around at an ursa trying to flank her, she shifted it to nagamaki mode. Even though the new weapon was meant for slashing rather than piercing as Milo was, it still punched through the beast's belly with ease.

A beowolf leapt at her from her offhand side. With speed born of years of practice, he extended her arm out and applied her Semblance to to Kiku, moving the shield into place on her arm before batting the monster out of the air. Then she cocked her arm and lashed out, slicing the unlucky creature from ribs to throat with the sharp edges of her new shield.

The Grimm all snarled and pressed in, only to meet a deadly sweep from Hanashite followed by a volley of repulser blasts that sent them flying. They were all low-level beowolves and ursas, but in those numbers, Pyrrha would have been daunted to say the least before. But in the armor, as Hematite, they were just grain to be reaped.

Someone was laughing in her ear. Jaune. She smiled to hear his utter glee at getting to fulfill his old dream. If she never got to leave the lab again and was relegated merely to playing mission control for him, this moment was worth it.

"Enjoying yourself?" She asked before she could stop her mouth from going off on its own. A larger, older beowolf clawed its way past the juveniles and ducked a shield slam, raking its claws across her midsection. The armor held and she repaid it for the attack by grabbing its face with the hand Kiku was attached to and firing the palm repulser point blank through its skull plate.

'Less-lethal'. Not 'non-lethal'.

"He-he... sorry." Jaune came back. She couldn't see the town hell steps from where she was, but the wet sounds of metal going through Grimm flesh spoke for itself.

"I don't blame you," She twisted her wrist and the clamps holding Kiku in place opened, dropping the shield into her free hand. Time to get a little fancy. "I honestly forgot how much I missed this. The rush, the satisfaction... it's exhilarating."

"You can say that again."
With a grunt of effort, she hurled the shield into a group of smaller ursas. The tiny handful of people who knew what her Semblance was—Team PERL, her mother, Jaune... they all thought she used it to bounce her shield around. People who didn't know assumed that her Semblance had something to do with rapidly calculating angles or seeing the world in slow motion.

The truth was that after her mother encouraged her to keep her Semblance secret and use it to her advantage in combat, she'd felt dishonest about it and set out to have just one trick in her arsenal that had nothing to do with her powers and everything to do with being Just. That. Good.

Kiku sliced deep into the first ursa in line, opening its chest before being redirected into the asphalt of the street. From there, it bounced back up, cutting the legs out from under the next beast in line before striking another in the throat.

The whole time, Pyrrha herself was in motion, cutting a terrible swath through a pack of beowolves while keeping tabs on the course of her shield. By the time it clove open the head of a fourth young monster, she was in its path and easily caught it.

Turning, she found that she was running low on Grimm to slay. The older, stronger ones were also the smarter ones. They knew they were outmatched and were starting to break and run, leaving mostly juveniles to mop up. She had no intention to let them fight and run away—because then they'd kill another day.

..And she was so glad she hadn't said that out loud into the commlink. Still, she couldn't let the monsters escape, she she retracted Hanashite's haft and span the falchion through its plasma cannon shift. The thick blade slit in half, rotating around a central hub so the two halves formed a pair of horn-like protrusions around a central nozzle. An electrical arc crackled across the gap before the nozzle just as high-pressure gas was pumped into it.

The sensors filtered out the brilliance as a knife's blade of lilac-colored plasma the length and width of her hand formed up. The weapon hummed as the magnetic fields meant to shape, propel and direct the plasma bolt powered up. Without bothering to aim, she fired, sending the bolt flashing down the street after the retreating Grimm.

As soon as the bolt was away, she raised her free hand and the bolt turned black as her Semblance took over and she steered it directly between the shoulderblades of a fleeting beowolf, dropping it. She was about to charge up another shot when words flickered in her Heads Up Display.

"Seismic event?" she read aloud, "Jaune, why does the suit have a seismic monitor?"

She got her answer before he could reply. The ground beneath her feet started to shake and crack apart. It wasn't an earthquake. She'd felt earthquakes before. This was a very deliberate motion as if something alive were...

Too late, she fired her boot repulsers. But the ground had already opened up before a Deathstalker twice the size of a city bus. And its pincer swept up with incredible celerity to close around her midsection.

RWBY RWBY RWBY

“I'd like to thank you for coming on such short notice, Miss Rose. I understand you have a very busy schedule.”

Headmaster Ozpin of Beacon Academy walked beside Ruby toward the landing pads for the school's bullheads. Despite thinking he was old when he was a student at his school, Ruby was now left to notice that this was largely due to the gray hair—and that the intervening decade
between she she entered Beacon and that moment hadn't change the Headmaster a bit.

“Oh, it's nothing.” She snorted a laugh and waved his thanks off. “I was going to volunteer for this in a couple of weeks anyway and I'm on leave right now.” She patted Crescent Rose, which rested along her lower back fondly. “It was either this or wait for my flight back to Patch. I'll take this any day, honestly.”

Ozpin gazed at her over the top of his glasses and after a moment, nodded. “Still, this came at an inopportune time. The fourth years students are on their senior trip, and both second and third years are participating in survival camp. I would have sent this group with a staff member, but it's the weekend and that leaves only myself and Miss Goodwitch.

Ruby stifled a giggle, wondering not for the first time if the authoritarian instructor knew Jaune used her voice for his house. “Um, really you don't have to explain anything to me. Just doin' my job.”

A tiny smiled graced the Headmaster's lips as they came within sight of the waiting bullhead and the team of students Ruby would be escorting to help Sienna Crossroads against its Grimm invasion. “I wish all my former students had that same attitude, Miss Rose.”

The conversation was interrupted by a chiming from the Headmaster's scroll. He held up a finger to ask her to excuse him before opening it. The image of Glynda Goodwitch appeared. Now in her early fifties, she'd aged well, though Ruby wasn't really sure how to judge that, seeing as she was sure the woman looked like an angry librarian even as a baby.

“Yes, Miss Goodwitch?”

“I'm... not sure how to put this. Sienna Crossroads is calling to thank you for the hunters you sent.”

Ozpin's eyebrows raised. “But our team hasn't even lifted off yet.”

“They have video. In fact the two of them seem to be engaging a Deathstalker as we speak.” Glynda called up a window depicting Hematite and the Scarab in the town square.

Ruby, ever curious, peeked over Ozpin's shoulder and saw two sets of powered armor doing battle. Her brain put together pieces almost as rapidly as she ran and her eyes widened. Oh my gosh—someone stole Jaune's tech! It's just like the White Fang stealing his stuff! I've got to warn him!

“Um... Professor Ozpin?” she asked, trying to hide the trepidation in her voice.

Ozpin never looked away from the screen. “Yes, Miss Rose?”

“I-guess-you-don't-need-to-send-those-second-years-so-you-don't-need-me-right? Kay-thanks-bye!” She disappeared in a blast of rose petals.

The armor held. The flexible plates gave, but they gave against the struts that held the exoskeleton for the artificial muscles together, meaning Pyrrha felt like she was wearing a too-tight corset rather than like she was going to be crushed out of the armor like the world's most horrible tube of toothpaste.

There was no telling how long that would last though, so she took aim and fired a plasma bolt into the join of its pincer. If she wasn't wearing an enclosed suit of armor, she would have smelled something delicious—almost like lobster—as bugflesh and tendons burned. The claw went slack,
dumping her unceremoniously to the ground.

She rolled just in time to miss the near useless claw being used to try and hammer her into the asphalt and forced herself to her feet, dashing out of the monstrous scorpion's reach. As soon as a wide enough gap opened between them, she wheeled, firing plasma into the thing's face.

It reacted by raising its ruined claw to block, the touch chitinous appendage merely scorching even under the heat of plasma fire. Then it lunged for her, missing only because she took to the air at the last minute.

Airborne and out of immediate danger, Pyrrha took stock. This was a truly ancient Deathstalker, judging by its size and resourcefulness in dealing with its wrecked appendage. It was smart. It was tough. And it was big.

A normal Deathstalker was one of the most physically invulnerable of Grimm, their only weaknesses being a slightly less armored underbelly and the joints of their armor. Except for a few specific weapon types: those that focused on very small areas of impact like scythes and picks, or those that dealt massive blunt force trauma enough to crack the exoskeleton, direct damage was out of the question.

She looked the beast over and her eyes fell on the stinger. It was very much like a pick. And she did have a plasma cutter on hand... It was worth a shot. Looping around the monster, she came up from behind it and fired up her plasma cannon again, this time leaving the bolt in place. When she got close enough, she locked on arm around the tail and set the cutter against the base of the stinger. Black smoke poured out of the bubbling carapace as the plasma started doing its job.

The Deathstalker didn't take too kindly to that and whipping the air violently with its tail. After three attempts, the force was too much and Pyrrha was sent careening down the street to smash into the side of a fountain.

“Pyrrha! Are you okay?”

Water was flooding out of the broken portion of the fountain all around her, but the damage reports she was getting from the suit were surprisingly light. A screech followed by the scuttle of eight giant legs coming her way told her that condition might not last long.

“I'm alright for now,” she told him, getting to her feet and looking in the direction of the oncoming Deathstalker. “Oh come on,” she found herself adopting one of Jaune's lines as she saw that she'd only made it about an eighth of the way through the stinger's base with the plasma cutter. Ancient Deathstalkers were tough. How else was she going to crack the damn things...

“Jaune?”

“Yeah?”

“I need your pile bunker. I think it's the only weapon we have that can kill this thing.”

“Yeah, I'm on my way. I've been on my way since it threw you, actually.” Jaune gave a nervous laugh. “Scarab wasn't really built to run. It's more made to stand and defend.”

There were so many 'I told you so's'. For all his genius, it was maddening to watch him hogtie himself purely out of a lack of belief in his skills. Pyrrha resisted the urge to call him out on this yet again and instead said, “Don't worry, I'll bring him to you.”

Lifting off again, she shifted Hanashite to spear mode and flew over the giant Grimm, slashing at it
as she went by.

Unleashing an enraged screech, the colossal arachnid wheeled around and gave chase back toward the plaza around town hall. Back toward where the Scarab plodded glacially forward.

When she reached him, Pyrrha dropped low and turned, switching to plasma cannon again and firing on the Deathstalker's eyes. Again, it protected its weak points by lifting a claw into the way.

“I'll keep the tail and claws off you. You get it with the pile bunker,” Pyrrha instructed.

A quick laugh came over the comms. “I've been asked to squish many a spider in my time—but not like this.”

“Build me a gigantic rolled up newspaper and I'll do it myself.”

“Careful what you wish for. I could totally do it.” Jaune readied the shield, lifting it overhead as the Deathstalker charged. Pyrrha took up a position above him, spinning Hanashite into nagamaki mode and holding it and Kiku at the ready.

Screeching a challenge, the Deathstalker fell upon them, swinging its good claw around to try and catch Jaune. Pyrrha answered by hurling Hanashite, aided by a repulser blast from the haft, into the claw's main joint, skewering it and causing the huge scorpion to reel back in pain.

Jaune stepped into the gap, warding off the other claw with Guillotine. The sword's blade split apart, opening a gap between the two halves as a mechanized magazine fed a tungsten spike into the chamber. Power surged as electricity coursed through the sword blade 'rails', generating a magnetic field that accelerated the spike into the offending claw.

The air was filled with the scent of sick-sweet boiling bugflesh as the lower half of the pincer exploded.

But ancient Grimm was tough and even with a pinioned left claw and a right one that was actually steaming in its ruin, it struck with its tail.

Pyrrha dove to block, ending up with her boots actually on Jaune's shoulders as she raised Kiku to intercept the murderous appendage.

At the very same time, Jaune brought his shield down atop the Deathstalker's head. He got a view of himself in the Scarab armor reflected in the Grimm's eyes just as he fired off the pile bunker—and then all seven repulsers.

The spike split the Grimm's carapace like a melon rind. The repulsers made what was inside into a dark mist.

Without another sound, the mighty Deathstalker went limp. Black smoke began to rise from its sundered form as started to disintegrate.

The two armored hunters looked around and found that no Grimm remained anywhere in Sienna Crossroads. Even the juvenile Grimm were smart enough to not hang around after witnessing something like that.

With nothing left to hunt, they lit off their repulser banks and left for home.

RWBYRWBYRWBY
Jaune was ecstatic to say the least. His first successful mission and he'd gotten to land the kill shot on the king of super-Grimm that made even seasoned hunters fill their pants in terror.

But the engineer in him couldn't help but go over the problems that needed to be addressed was the wardrobe removed the armor from them.

First and foremost, he needed to come up with a better alloy for Hematite's armor plates. He could see the deep gouges where the Deathstalker had stressed the current ones to their limits. They'd held, but he didn't want to take chances with Pyrrha's life.

Then where was the Scarab. 'Slow' was the word. It was big and strong, but moved like molasses uphill in winter. Plus the repulser array needed to keep it in the air hogged way too much power—power he needed to run better weapons if they were going to be fighting ancient Grimm ever again.

On the other hand, pile bunker tech was definitely something to consider. He was imagining a fist-mounted array like Yang's Ember Celica—only using captive bolt pistols instead of shotgun shells.

Jaune's mind was going a mile a minute to the point that he barely noticed he was out of his armor until Pyrrha emerged from hers as a bundle of unprecedented energy.

“That was beyond... anything I expected!” She raved as the wardrobe removed the last of her artificial muscles. “I never felt so strong... so capable!” She was suddenly right in front of him, crushing him into a hug, lifting him off his feet. “Jaune? Did you know it would be like that? I feel so... so alive, so invigorated! Like I could do... do...”

Jaune looked down at her, grinning along with her when their eyes locked...

“Anything.” Her tone shifted down from hyped to husky. And a second later, she kissed him.

Chapter End Notes

RWBYRWBYRWBY

You called that other one a cliffhanger? No, this is a cliffhanger.

People asked about the Scarab's design: my vision for it was to look like a human version of WarGreymon from Digimon, but as long as it's incredibly bulky, imagine it as you wish. Jaune will be designing a new one come next arc.

We have not begun to have fun with the plasma torch yet. Wait 'til she gets a big, dust-powered one.

But I know what people want to talk about: Why yes, the real Glynda is an actual character in this.

Oh, you mean the kiss. I feel like it had to happen like this because of how Pyrrha works as a character. She is the kind of person who seems confident in her strength and comfortable in combat, but nowhere else. Nothing else was ever on the menu for her growing up it seems. She live sin the adrenaline high where she can weight and measure things at lightning speed and be decisive. Take that away and the STILL tries to weigh and measure everything and will just happily go on doing so until pushed.
Well... -PUSH-.

Also, I think her inner monologue would be dorkily funny instead of grandiose like her speech patterns. She probably has a rich inner world.
Instinct was the greatest ally of the true warrior. Training, conditioned the body not just to become physically capable, but to build up a repertoire of muscle memory. A capable warrior was able to anticipate and react to ever-changing combat situations where there was no time for thought, only action.

Of course what was good in combat wasn't necessarily good in other situations where thought and reason would be of more use.

For example, when you start coming down off the biggest adrenaline high of ones life to find out that you've lifted your boss off the ground and started kissing them.

It was that split second after she had any chance at all of choosing not to do it, that she came to her senses long enough to realize exactly what she'd done. And was still doing to her mounting horror. Her eyes fluttered open (when had she closed them?) in time to lock on to Jaune's which were wide with shock.

“Mmm?” was the only noise he could manage.

Yep. She was fired. So very fired. No matter how well they worked together, how much they'd shared over the past three years, one does not manhandle one's boss and—oh yes, she was very much running her tongue across his lips—molest him without consequences. Everything she'd done and worked toward in the past three years, all the good they were going to do with the armors, and whatever friendship and camaraderie they had was gone. Like flash paper in a blast furnace.

She could actually go to prison for this, she realized. Would Jaune really press charges against her? What a sad end for Pyrrha Nikos; undone by a literal and unthinking crime of passion.

While she was fretting—and she really needed to stop kissing him at some point—she watched Jaune's face relax and his eyes slowly shut.

“Mmm.” he managed.

Then she felt his hands go to her waist and tighten. It was around the same time he parted his lips, allowing her tongue to slip inside at the same time his slipped into hers. Now it was her turn to open her eyes in shock.

Could this really be happening?

No, of course it couldn't. As much as she loathed to admit it, this was Jaune and he was more than likely just happy some woman was kissing him at all instead of turning him down for reasons she couldn't comprehend.

Given what he'd said about his love life and early years, it was probably his first kiss, she realized with a stab of shame. It struck her as odd that somehow, through entirely different avenues, both of them came to be in their mid-twenties without this experience. And it made her feel all the worse that she'd stolen his first.

She had to stop this... wonderful, amazing moment. She had to put an end to it and face her
punishment no matter what that might be.

Reluctantly—extremely reluctantly—she pulled away from the kiss and set Jaune back on the ground. More horror as she realized that she'd been holding him up that whole time. Even if he wasn't bothered by the kiss, she was damn sure no guy wanted a woman who could do that.

She stepped back, actually having a little trouble disentangling herself from his arms. Time to earn up to what she'd done.

Somewhere along the way, her mouth must had translated that to 'lie your ass off', as the next words out of her mouth were. “I... seem to have gotten carried away. Adrenaline and all. It does odd things to you.” Yeah, no one would ever believe that, especially not a cerified genius.

Jaune swayed a bit on his feet. “Yeah, adrenaline's good. Everyone loves adrenaline.”

Or he might accept it without question. Well that was lucky.

“I'm sorry.” she added, staring anywhere but at him.

At that, Jaune seemed to snap out of his daze, shaking his head and looking at her in confusion. “Why?”

Having expected a slew of angry words, Pyrrha came up short at the question, especially at the slightly disappointed tone to it. She finally chanced a glance back at his face and found not anger but cautious optimism. “You... don't want me to be sorry?”

Jaune blinked rapidly trying to process what just happened and what was just said. “Well...” he chuckled self consciously, “I mean...” He bit his lip and looked away, “I mean, are you sorry?” His expression begged her to say 'no' and she couldn't mistake that.

“I...”

“Incoming called from Ruby Rose. Emergency Code 0-0-1-8-5.”

“Oh come on!” Jaune exploded, looking heavenward as if expecting to spot whatever trickster god was tormenting him.

Pyrrha tentatively stepped up to him and put a hand on his shoulder. “It is an emergency, Jaune. And I promise this conversation isn't over.” She mustered a small, encouraging smile that he slowly returned.

“Okay, Glynda. Put her through.” With one more look in Pyrrha's direction, he led the way out into the lab.

“Jaune!” Ruby's voice came in over the speakers along with the rush of wind. “Ohmigosh, Jaune, you won't believe what I just saw! Ozpin was about to send me to this town Cinnamon... something... with some second year students, but before we could even leave, some people in powered armor showed up! And I was like, that's gotta be Jaune's design, 'cause there's no way that's a coincidence, right? I mean you guys escape the White Fang with a set of powered armor and suddenly people show up with powered armor?”

The pair shared a look. At this point, Ruby was going to figure it out or she was going to go crazy trying to track down Hematite and the Scarab.

“Ruby, are you running?” Pyrrha asked.
“Doy!” replied the Red Reaper, “I'm almost to the Compound. I ran all the way from Beacon.”

“You couldn't hire a car?”

“Too slow! We need to circle the wagons, call up your satellite thingies! We can still track those two if we act fast. I mean imagine if the White Fang got a hold of the armor you used and build more. That could be a disaster!”

Jaune's expression became one of concern. The Mk.1 had come apart in air, its parts scattered across the desert. He'd assumed the rescue group ruby arrived in when they were found had picked up the pieces—or at the very least, Atlas. But what had become of it?

His train of though was cut off when Pyrrha leaned over to him. Proximity to her was never going to be the same again, he realized, feeling a pleasant trill at the near-contact. “Should we tell her?”

He nodded. Might as well.

“Ruby, you can relax, it's us.”

“Well yeah, I know that with the three of us, we can totally deal with whoever they creeps are. Well, four, 'cause I called Yang. She was supposed to meet me in patch, but I told her we had an emergency, so she's gonna be in Vale in a couple of days.”

“That secret lasted all of thirty minutes,”: whispered Pyrrha, then out loud: “No. ruby, he means it's us. The two armored Hunters that were at Sienna Crossroads.”

Ruby laughed out loud. “Okay, you I can believe, Pyrrha, but no offense, Jaune, the big guy was awesome—you know, for a dirty thief. I mean he was like whoosh, slice sha-ping! And then he clobbered this giant Deathstalker with his shield while his partner was standing on his shoulders and it shot a spike and blew it's head off!”

“Yeah... I was pretty awesome.”

The wind obscuring part of Ruby's call stopped. “Wait... you're serious? Have you been holding out on me all this time?”

“More like the past two weeks,” he admitted, then sighed. He would really rather not have a visitor tonight so he and Pyrrha could deal with... whatever had just happened between them, but Ruby was highly involved in the whole 'elite hunter' situation and that had to be resolved. “Look, I'm having Glynda stand down the security for you. Come in through the garage and we'll meet you in the lab, alright?” He shot Pyrrha an apologetic look before giving the order to Glynda.

Less then three minutes later, a storm of rose petals entered the lab with Rbuy Rose at its center. She arrived to find Jaune and Pyrrha sitting side by side at a draft table, keeping a highly conspicuous distance between each other all the same.

Her eyes narrowed. “Are you kidding me?”

The pair jumped, unsure about what set the younger woman off.

“I knew you were just having fun with me. I rush down here hoping to see you guys all decked out in that awesome armor and instead you two look like you're having a pajama party.”

Jaune looked down and only then realized he was still dressed in what he'd been wearing to watch movies. They'd just headed down immediately to get armored up and never changed thereafter.
He felt the tips of his ears turn red and shook his head. "We were taking the rest of the day off when we heard about the attack. I mean we couldn't take time out to change while people were in danger, right?"

"I usually stop to put on my combat gear at least." Ruby was still eyeing them as if they'd played a trick on him.

"Doesn't really matter as much when we can put the power armor on top of whatever we happen to be wearing." He snorted a laugh, "It's not like they won't work if we're not wearing a flight suit or some kind of skin-tight latex thing with ports all over it." When Ruby still wouldn't stop staring him down, he sighed. "You're not going to believe me unless you see them, are you?"

"Nope," she replied, popping the 'p' sound.

Ten minutes later, the two armors had been fully assembled in the wardrobe and Jaune and Pyrrha had explained to her the idea they'd hatched. It wasn't quite clear if Ruby heard any of it, as the second she laid eyes on the two sets of powered armor, all her attention was on them and the accompanying weapons.

Currently, she was perched on the Scarab's shoulder, practically hanging off it while ogling Guillotine. She was left without any other option, seeing as the sword weighed around eighty pounds. "Oh my gosh, are these phosphorus rounds? Crescent Rose usually only uses standard propellant, but using these—I could set beowolves on fire from almost a mile away. That would be so cool!"

Looking under the Scarab's arm upside down at Jaune and Pyrrha, she gave them a bright, inquisitive look. "So how strong are these things? How do you make them fly? When do I get one?"

Pyrrha's giggles were interfering with Jaune's ability to fend off the tide of questions. "Slow down, Rubes. I can give you the specs, but you've got to promise me that this doesn't go past the three of us, okay? We especially don't need Ironwood learning about this."

Ruby blew a raspberry. "Why would I tell the general about this?"

"Because it's your literal job description to tell him about whatever Arc industries is coming out with?" Pyrrha offered.

The younger woman shrugged. "Yep. My job is to tell General Ironwood about every move Arc Industries makes. And I do my job to the letter. Buuuut as far as I can tell, you guys built these in Jaune's personal workspace, right? I don't see any Arc industries logos on anything down here, do you?"

Jaune let out a sigh of relief. "Glad you're aboard with this, Ruby."

"I can tell Yang thought right? I mean I've gotta tell her something since I already told her to get her butt here from Patch because there was an emergency."

"I suppose if it's just you and Yang..." Pyrrha started.

"And Weiss."

"No!" Jaune and Pyrrha said at the same time, startling Ruby so much she fell off the Scarab.

Picking herself up, she gave them her best sad puppy eyes, which were still terrifyingly effective
even in her twenties. "But she's my partner! I can't leave her out of this!"

Jaune groaned and moved over to the wall to lean against it, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Ruby, I know you guys were partners at Beacon and even after that, but Weiss works for her father now. She does what he tells her too—what's best for him. She even admitted it herself when she called about your friend Blake."

"Yeah, but..." Ruby started, but he cut her off.

"I just started cleaning up the mess from letting the White Fang get hold of my munitions. Having Wilhelm Schnee get powered armor and arc reactor tech would be my worst nightmare right now. I'm sorry Ruby, but Weiss is completely out of the question.

Ruby pouted hard at him. "He's not like that anymore. I swear! No one knows her better than me and I can vouch for her that she wouldn't tell her dad about this."

Pyrrha approached the younger woman with an expression full of sympathy. "I understand you don't want to cut Weiss out of something like this, but please think about this from Jaune's perspective. Especially knowing the consequences if she even let her father know on accident.

"We both know that Wilhelm Schnee is a monster. He's worked for years to make sure Atlas is a terrible place to live for the Faunus and not precisely the best place to live for any of his workers."

She paused before choosing to use the most hurtful example; one she knew was an old wound she was loathe to reopen. "You remember it was his fault that Penny."

Ruby silenced her with a glare. She'd been the only one to know that Penny Polendina was an android granted sapience and the ability to generate an aura. That is, until Wilhelm Schnee discovered and leaked her secret in order to disgrace the scientist that created her and force him into obscurity. Then he'd used his influence with the Atlasian Council to have Project Simple Soul shuttered. As far as anyone knew, Penny was lying deactivated in a crate somewhere and Penelope Polendina, the scientist's daughter who was the basis of Penny, was forced to leave her home country.

"I know what he's done," she said, her voice distressingly cold for Ruby. She nodded slowly. "Alright then. I won't tell Weiss. So what's next, more Grimm?"

Jaune pursed his lips and pushed himself off the wall. "If there's another town with an emergency, sure. But now that we've had a shakedown flight, I think we're ready to take care of another of my messes." Looking upward, he asked, "Glynda, can you throw the redemption file up on the walls please?"

"Certainly."

The lights in the wardrobe room dimmed and images started to unfold. Rallies where figures were being burned in effigy, police reports from Vale and surrounding settlements of assaults, harassment, vandalism, and arson. The perpetrators and victims were both human and faunus, but the methods and cruelty were all the same.

"You were right, Ruby: the backlash from human supremacy groups has been awful and the White Fang has been rattling their sabers to make sure people know they weren't placated by what I did. It's been brewing for two weeks now, but there's been nothing we could do about it until now."

He directed their attention to a section of the wall that showed snippets of security feeds showing Humanity First members manning trucks full of weapons. "Now it looks like we're ready just in
time. Humanity First has been stockpiling weapons and conventional explosives in a valley outside of Vale north of Beacon. Glynda managed to discover that one of their bomb makers, Vincent Cleary, is there too. It just so happens that the local pro-faunus groups in Vale are having a rally for peace in a week's time—the couple of days after the Arc Industries Charity Ball."

Taking a moment to let the others look over the evidence, he resumed in a calm, assured voice. "They won't want to risk being caught, so they won't move anything until the last minute. I've dedicated a satellite to watching them. They second they start moving, I plan to hit them. Repulsers can take them out without setting anything off, so I... we can knock them on their asses and let local authorities mop up."

Pyrrha nodded, having expected something like this. "That sounds like a good plan."

"If we're not going to get armors, Yang and I are going to need disguises at least—but I think I can speak for both of us when I say we're in."

Some hours of discussion, planning and just plain chatting over pizza followed. It was around ten o'clock when Ruby finally left, armed with hotel reservations for herself and Yang courtesy of Jaune. This left he and Pyrrha alone again in the living room; both sitting on their accustomed end of the couch with a huge and now very awkward space between them.

"So..." Jaune suddenly got up and crossed to the mantle to examine Crocea Mors. "...about what happened before Ruby got here. You never gave me an answer."

"Hmm?" Pyrrha stayed where she was, wringing her hands, having no idea where the conversation was going and having honestly forgotten the question.

Jaune frowned, but gave her the benefit of the doubt seeing as how they'd been interrupted. "About whether you were sorry or not."

"I'm... not sorry," she said quietly. "I didn't exactly plan it, and I really did have a slip of my self control... but that was something I'd been wanting to do for a while. I just hope it didn't distress you too much."

He blinked. "Dis—distressed? How... why would that distress me?"

Still looking anywhere but at him, she sighed softly. "I know it's typical for men to pretend they aren't bothered by it, but unwanted—uh—contact like that is still—"

"Wait." Jaune turned around, holding up a hand. "You think that was unwanted?"

She peered up at him through a cascade of red hair. "It... wasn't?"

"How can you possibly think it was unwanted?" Jaune almost laughed at the idea. "I mean, you're... you." Even as dense as he could sometimes be, he noticed her flinch and immediately knew why. "I don't mean 'you' the way you're 'you' to everyone else, Pyrrha." Slowly, carefully, he came back and sat down beside her, though careful not to make actual contact. "'You' as in the amazing woman who's been here the past three years, watching me be an idiot, helping me with my work, even just hanging out with me and watching movies or sharing meals. The 'you' who's been the best assistant, the best bodyguard... the best friend I ever had. How could I not be beyond happy that someone like that decided to kiss me?"

She wrung her hands and looked down into what little space still existed between them. "If you felt
that way, then why did you never talk to me like you talk to other women? It's been three years and you never even glanced my way inappropriately, but with other women..."

Jaune groaned a little and let his head drop back to strike the back of the couch. "Do you really think I don't know I'm bad at flirting? I've known that the... thing I do with other women is pretty awful and deserves all the scorn I get for it. But after so many years, it's like a reflex and I don't know how to fix it."

He chuckled a little. "At first I didn't try anything with you because I was pretty sure you were going to murder me and didn't want to give you an excuse. Then I got to know you and I really, really didn't want you to get upset or insulted and leave.

A tiny smile appeared on her face. "I would never have hurt you, but I must admit: I was expecting you to turn out to be this sleazy womanizer who was totally going to destroy my illusions of you."

"See? I was right to worry." Jaune said, relaxing a little. "And later on, I thought I knew you well enough to guess that you had better taste than me."

Feeling bold, Pyrrha scooted over closer to him and put her hand over his, shortly thereafter entwining their fingers. "Sometimes it amazes me that you don't see it. I had all but fallen for you before we even met, you know that? After that day at Menagerie when I saw Helios fire, I tried my best to learn more about you: this great man who did great things only with his mind. In a way, I was guilty of what my own fans did to me: I idolized you."

Now her eyes were on their hands and her smile grew warmer. "Then I met you and you weren't just the person I read about: you were kind and funny and... human. Human in ways sometimes other people aren't. I came to care for you Jaune Arc. More than I ever imagined I could."

Bolder still, she brought their conjoined hands up to her chest so they were over the arc reactor in her chest. "You took my heart. And then you built me a better one."

Jaune swallowed nervously, then took his own chance to be bold, leaning in to plant a kiss of his own on her lips.

It was a quick, chaste kiss, nothing like the spontaneous, passionate event of a kiss they'd shared earlier, but it was followed by another and another until they were both breathless and staring into one another's eyes. Despite everything the 'smooth' persona that had caused him so much trouble in the past protested, he felt the need to be fully honest in that moment.

"I... can't guarantee you this is going to be some kind of epic romance. I'm kinda new at this."

She gave him a wan smile. "As am I. Training one's entire adolescence and then becoming a lone huntress isn't exactly conducive to a social life."

"Then I guess we'll have to play this by ear." Jaune said as she leaned into him for another kiss.

Chapter End Notes

I toyed with having the kiss make things awkward for a while, but as someone else put it, they've waited long enough and I feel like there's more potential in writing them as a couple. Still rated T though, so don't expect any sexy times on screen.

It's not that I'm averse to that, but my roots and seven years' body of work has been in
Web-16 rated writing. I've never written a sex scene for public consumption, though I'm told that if I want to actually make money writing, I should probably get on that. I dunno. If people really want it, I can take this to M, but I don't really plan on it.

Someone asked about my posting speed. Believe it or not, I post 'em as I write them—on top of the 6,000 words of original fiction I turn in each week on my sight. Like I said, this is my job and these day, you have to be very prolific to survive with it.

And finally, you might remember me talking about my crossover idea from a few chapters back. Well, it kind of grew on me, but also grew so specific to my Ere setting that the characters are really no longer their RWBY counterparts at all, so now I'm developing it as its own original fiction: the Dragonwrought Chronicles.

The original gist was using my World of Ere setting (Steampunk with also high magic= dungeonpunk) with a fully magical Beacon where there is not partner/team system, but Weiss brings her own handmaiden/hired muscle in the form of Pyrrha to gain an unfair advantage. It just went crazy from there. I've got a sword that's just a bunch of razor blades held together with magnetism (what if Ivy's whip-sword and a shotgun made of nightmares and cutting had a baby?), a spell that makes animals hate you and also be immortal, and all the backstories ever.
Like any other morning, Jaune Arc woke up in bed alone to the voice of a teacher from a school he wasn't good enough to join. He didn't think anyone else would understand it, but he found it very motivational. On some level it felt like he was starting the day with something to prove.

After a bleary-eyed walk to the bathroom for a shower and shave, he lumbered down the hall to the kitchen.

“Good morning.” Pyrrha chirped. She'd been up before him, possibly for hours and was in an incredibly good mood as she rose from the table to greet him.

His brain tried to tell him something from inside the pile of wet cotton sleep had cast it into. Struggling with all his might to rub two neurons together, he did a quick review of the scene. First, Pyrrha usually didn't get up just because he entered the room. It wasn't as if he was the King or a Councilman or something. Further, she was dressed very casually that morning. A flowy red wrap-around skirt that was cut so one side went to her calf, while the other came up to just above the knee, showing off a generous amount of creamy skin he probably shouldn't be staring at; and a white short-sleeved t-shirt emblazoned with her personal sigil: a spear in a broken circle.

That shirt had a history, he recalled. It had been barely half a year into Pyrrha's employment as his bodyguard-slash-assistant and he was still prone to getting roaring drunk in the evenings and making random purchases.

Like a silk-screening machine.

Having already lost all fear of retribution for speaking her mind, Pyrrha questioned why he needed his own personal t-shirt machine when he was rich enough to special order things himself. His response was to scan her sigil from off he tie clip and proceed to make her a t-shirt of her own.

It won him the argument if only for the fact that she'd been too dumbfounded that that was his rebuttal to bother continuing.

While he was reminiscing Pyrrha had come closer, moving tentatively like he might run away. He blinked at this and then, in the kind of oddly selective awareness of the sleep-deprived, noticed she had a white flower tucked behind her ear. Botonay not being his strong suit, he had no idea what kind it was aside from the fact that ti had huge petals and was big enough to span his hand if he'd the mind to reach out for it.

But he didn't because Pyrrha had entered his personal space and had paused—hesitating, he noticed. A query as to what was wrong died on his tongue as she leaned in, craning her neck up just a little to make up for their near-negligible height difference and kissed him on the cheek.

Then and only then did Jaune's brain finally managed to get its point across and he fully recalled what happened the night before. Well not recalled it, more like finally accepted that it wasn't the product of a drunken celebration over a successful mission.

Pyrrha, no doubt noticing the little shock that went through him, shied away, her face flushing just a bit. “I'm sorry. I was just...”
“Checking to see if last night was real?” Jaune finished for her, feeling a slow smile spreading across his face. Now he remembered why he was still so sleepy: they'd stayed on the couch kissing and renewing their confessions to each other until three in the morning before finally retiring to their own rooms. Yes, it was all real and it was spectacular.

She nodded and allowed herself to smile as well now that her fears had been proven false. “Um... coffee is fresh, pancakes and sausage are ready, and Ruby called. Yang's flight gets in at eleven.”

Something else that had slipped his mind: at some point when they'd been talking to Ruby he'd brought up the Ball. As Arc Industries' liaison to the Atlas military, Ruby was contractually obligated to go and Jaune couldn't in good conscience skip out on the causes the Ball raised money from, especially not after having added a number of Faunus rights groups to the mix following his press conference. With Yang flying in, he felt compelled to extend an official invite to his old friend and somehow Ruby had tuned that into a promise to be the sisters' 'fairy god-Jaune and buy them gowns.

At the Chocolat Botique.

Jaune groaned out loud. Pyrrha patted him on the back with one hand and with the other took him by the arm to lead him to the table. “You did promise.”

“But it's Coco,” he whined, “she has it in for me. And it's not just for the tie thing either. She's always been... I dunno, sharp with me. You'd think since I'm her friend's boss, that would earn me some credit, but... nope,” he popped the 'p' like Ruby was so fond of doing.

“That just reminded me that it's been almost ten years since you even had a boss,” Pyrrha chuckled, sitting him down before taking her usual seat across from him. “Most people don't like their boss and their friends aren't going to be fans either.”

Jaune frowned a little at that. “You think Velvet doesn't like me?”

“I think it doesn't matter whether she does or not as far as Coco's concerned,” she poured herself a mug of coffee from the pot and slid it over to him. “Every time Velvet has to work late or on a weekend and it screws up their plans, every time she's out of sick days or isn't making enough—that's your fault as far as Coco's concerned. Thus, hate.”

“It's tough to be the boss.” Jaune sighed, half joking. “Hopefully she won't take it out on your three.”

Pyrrha paused in the middle of buttering her pancakes. “Us... three?”

“Yeah. You, Ruby and Yang. You are going to the Ball with me as my date this year, right?”

On previous years, Pyrrha made it a point to play up the bodyguard part of her title during the many social functions Jaune hosted or attended. That meant getting to wear a suit and skulk on the edges of the crowd, safely insulated from the social elite, the dignitaries and the media figures who always wanted to ask her questions that usually began and ended with how she fell so far as to be an assistant to a 'rich idiot with no day job'. Even though it was clear Jaune had a day job... that involved staying in his house for days at a time.

It wasn't that she was opposed to dressing up and attending normal social gatherings—she'd even allowed herself to be dragged into the club scene a few times on Jaune's whims—but the big society shindigs promised to annoy and enrage her. And yet...

“Oh. Um...” She glanced up at him and found no help there. Eager as a puppy who heard bacon
frying, Jaune was looking at her expectantly. To buy time, she started cutting her pancake into many bite-sized pieces. “Well I suppose…” There were so many reasons to say ‘no’, but they weren’t sounding good enough in her head. As much as she might run from it, she was Pyrrha Nikos. She’d fought monsters, she’d defeated some of the deadliest people on Remnant in arena combat. She was the Invincible Girl... Woman. Could she really not handle a few smarmy reporters?

Of course she could. But she was nothing if not cautious, so she decided to ask a question that had been nagging her since she woke up.

“This might seem like a silly question…” putting it that way made her wince before it was even out of her mouth, “…but how are we supposed to act in public now?”

Jaune blinked, swallowed the piece of sausage he’d been chewing, then blurted out, “Wha?”

Pyrrha cleared her throat to cover the embarrassed squeal that tried to escape it. Then, in as dignified a tone as she could muster, said, “Now that we're a couple, I was just wondering how we should... conduct ourselves in public. As often as I wish my star has fallen, it isn't and you're a celebrity in your own right. And the people's interest in us is at an all-time high after the kidnapping and the press conference, so I think this is a fairly important question.”

If stares could be living things, Jaune's was a cow watching a car pass by. It knew on some level that there was a thing there, but could not for the life of him make sense of it. “You mean like... PDA?”

“Yes,” she made a show of daintily taking a sip of coffee. As long as she pretended this was a normal conversation normal people would have, maybe it would come true.

“What exactly are you planning on doing? Holding hands, pecks on the cheek... or like pinning me to the wall with your spear and having your way with me?” He immediately covered his mouth after saying the last one, especially because that conjured mental images he kind of didn't want her to know he could imagine.

Pyrrha promptly choked on that sip of coffee.

After a round of coughing, sputtering and Jaune slapping her on the back, she could finally breathe again and Jaune gave her a sheepish grin. “Pretend I didn't say that last part.”

She swallowed and caught her breath before looking away. “For now...”

It was a good thing he wasn't eating anything at the time, or he might have choked as well. Doing her best to gloss over things, she continued. “I told you it was a silly question. I just don't want to be one of those couple's that walks around with their hands in each other's back pockets, or that have to continually hold on to each other even when they're just at the grocery store.”

Jaune quirked an eyebrow. “Spend high school being annoyed by those types too?”

“Oh my yes.”

He grinned. “We won't have to worry about that being us. I mean, I have the groceries delivered and that skirt doesn't even have pockets.”

That earned him a playful punch in the shoulder he was certain would have bruised if his aura hadn't been unlocked.
“Some beauty must remain forever nameless, for to place a label upon it is to mar it forever more. Except for the most perfect, flawless beauty. For that, there can only be one word: Yang.”

“Will you stop mugging for the mirror and just pick a pair of sunglasses already?!” Ruby complained as her big sister peered over a pair of mirrored shades into a mirror in the Valean Air Terminal’s gift shop. “We were supposed ot meet Jaune and Pyrrha ten minutes ago!”

The elder sister was wearing a brown leather vest over a white button-down shirt (with the top few buttons strategically left open), a pair of cut-off khaki shorts and heavy-duty hiking boots. She tossed the shades aside and grabbed another pair that were nearly identical except the mirrored part was tinted lilac.

“Don’t hate, little sister. I’ve gotta make sure all my new accessories match.” For emphasis, she hooked her thumb under the new belt she'd arrived with. It was an odd piece to be certain: three braided straps of leather, obviously laced with Dust judging by the crackling red-violet patterns that made themselves visible in a certain light, secured by an intricate buckle. The buckle was made out of polished, black stone and fitted with a brass dial. The dial resembled a clock face, but with circles of varying sizes; clockwise becoming progressively larger, counter-clockwise, progressively smaller.

Ruby let out a frustrated growl. Today she was wearing a black turtleneck with a grinning cartoon corgie on the front, her customary cape, and track pants with her combat boots. Even on her time off Crescent Rose hung from its harness slung along her back. “You know, I'd care a lot more about that if you actually told me what your new toy did.”

Yang preened with the new set of glasses for a moment, then turned to Ruby and pulled them down to wink at her. “Sorry, but my showmanship skills demand I put on one show only, so you're gonna have to wait til we link up with Jaune and Pyrrha.”

“Which is what I'm trying to do!” Ruby snapped, waving her fists to the side.

Seeing her little sister sufficiently aggravated, Yang shrugged and plucked the glasses from her face and headed for the cashier. “These'll do.” While she was waiting for her purchase to the rung up, she looked back to see Ruby still back by the mirror and sunglasses rack, fuming. “Well what are you waiting for, slowpoke? We can't leave out friends hanging!”

Ruby ground out a string of expletives and followed her older sister out of the shop.

They found Jaune and Pyrrha sitting on a bench in front of the fountain just inside the main entrance. Weirdly, they were both wearing their personal sigils: Pyrrha on a t-shirt and Jaune on the breast pocket of the black button-down he was wearing with a pair of jeans.

“What's this? No marching band? No ticker tape?” Yang complained through a massive grin, “No 'hail the conquering hero'? No huge novelty check for all the new territories I've been opening up that are gonna need some more of your big, honkin' guns?”

Jaune got to his feet. “The second Arc industries starts up a Reclaimer division, I will put you in charge and make sure all of your checks are novelty-sized. Though I'm pretty sure I'd have to fight the Mistrali government to get you.” He spread his arms while offering a welcoming grin. “It's been too long, Yang.”
The eldest of the sisters from Patch enveloped him in a bear hug that swiftly squeezed the air out of his lungs. “Too damn long, Jauney-boy! But that’s what you have to expect in the dark and mysterious wilds of Mistral! No communications. No modern conveniences. Just you and your team in the wilderness, fighting Grimm, mapping ancient ruins—and appreciating the generous lack of anti-pillaging laws in the places of the world mankind gave up on.”

“Anti-pillaging laws?” Pyrrha stood up around the time Yang let go of Jaune.

“She means grave-robbing,” Ruby stage-whispered from behind her sister.

Yang blew a raspberry. “I mean adventuring! Most of those places aren't graves anyway. But they are full of treasure that me and my crew gets to split, minus a twenty-percent commission to the Mistralis, of course.” She gently petted the belt's buckle. “That's how I got my baby.”

“Now can you tell us what it does?” asked Ruby.

“Not just yet. We're in public. This is serious top secret stuff.” Yang smirked and stepped around Jaune. “Hey there, P-money! How's it goin’?” She held out a hand for Pyrrha to shake, but the moment the other woman accepted it, she pulled her into a back-thumping hug.

Wincing at Yang's enthusiastic embrace, Pyrrha tried to return the gesture while saying, “It's going quite well, actually, thank you.”

Yang finally let her go and stepped back, lowering her voice conspiratorially. “So I hear you guys have some problems that can be solved by my specialty. And by 'my specialty', I mean violence. I got Ember Celica in my checked bags, ready to go when ya need me.”

“We'll get to that soon enough,” said Jaune with a sigh. “First though, your sister has managed to convince me to spring for your ball gowns. So we're headed for the Chocolat Botique.”

Yang's eyes lit up. “Seriously? You're paying to get us hooked up with dresses by Coco? She put me on a two-year waiting list last time I told her I wanted something made.”

“That's because she knows your credit's about as good as ursa fur.” Ruby muttered.

“Not anymore it's not!” Yang exclaimed, whipping out a credit card. “Adventuring is kickass for padding the pocketbook. I've got like a hundred thousand lien saved up already from the stuff I've hauled in and sold. Rich folks love their pre-war crap.” Hey, Pyrrha. Since Jaune's taking care of our duds, maybe I'll buy you one so you can actually take part in this party instead of shadowing tall, blonde and scraggly here. Not like you're needed much anyway with him being accompanied by the two most lethal sisters on Remnant."

She waggled her golden brows and grabbed Pyrrha by the shoulder, sweeping her free hand out before them as if showing off a gorgeous vista. ”These things are just crawling with hot young up and comers with more money than brains and personal trainer to keep 'em sexy. You might score one if you got dolled up instead of playing armed and dangerous all night.”

It was just about that time the both Pyrrha and Jaune realized that Ruby and by extension Yang were unaware of their new relationship. It wasn't like they were going to tell Ruby they kissed and didn't know what that mean the night before and there hadn't been any time between then and that moment to really update them.

"Um..." Pyrrha stiffened in Yang's grip, unsure of exactly what to say.

Luckily (for once) Jaune's mouth worked faster than his brain. "Actually, I'm paying for a gown
for Pyrrha. She's going with me."

Ruby looked between the two of them. A sudden awkwardness that wasn't there before had descended, but she wasn't quite ready to believe what her intuition was telling her—it had been disastrously wrong before and would be again, she was sure. "What? She's going undercover as your date this year because of all the death threats?"

"No—though that wouldn't have been a bad idea. She's going with me... just, you know with me. As my date."
A snort came from Yang. "What? You finally got so tired of being a plus one that you had to get Pyrrha to stand in as a date?"

At that point, Pyrrha shook Yang's hand off her shoulder and moved over to Jaune, making a special point to take his hand. "He means as in a real date." The confidence with which she'd stated that ebbed away quickly as self-consciousness took hold, "We kind of got together last night."

"Wait." Ruby said, looking horrified, "Last night last night? I was there last night and before that you were..." Her eyes grew wide and she streaked over to her big sister, grabbing her arm. "Oh my god, Yang, I was there for like hours. I was interrupting their sex!"

"Not that kind of together!" The couple in question protested as one, both going red.

The look on Yang's face was the same one that came across it when she uncovered a valuable find. Only this wasn't priceless artifice and ancient devices, but juicy gossip, teasing material and possibly blackmail material if she played her cards right.

"Oh reeeallly?" She asked, leaning toward the pair. "Tell me more."

**RWBY**

The time since Jaune Arc's infamous press conference had been a frustrating one for Lie Ren. Arc had sequestered himself in his compound, which was itself a veritable fortress the guaranteed that if he didn't want to see anyone, they didn't get seen. The man's secretary—who by some weird twist of fate used to be Ren's old partner from Beacon—had competently deflected any firm appointment dates as well, leaving him still at square one in his primary mission.

Which left him to deal with his secondary mission: minding Nora Valkyrie and explaining Remnant society to her, which wasn't any less frustrating.

How she managed to be such an insanely strong Huntress with such an advanced weapon while not even knowing the names of the four Kingdoms baffled him to no end. On top of that, she was possessed of boundless energy that she never made even a token effort to contain and a curiosity that bordered on the suicidal.

In a few short days, they had been banned from the zoo, six museums, two movie theaters, one mall, and an arboretum. Ren had given up on trying to reach her culture by immersing her in it and resorted to just keeping her in the hotel in front of the Discovering, Wandering, and Vale News Network Channels. That didn't stop the constant streams of questions.

And yet, none of that was what truly bothered Ren about his new 'partner'. No, the problem was two-fold. First, he'd fallen into a comfortable cadence of answering Nora's questions with incredibly celerity. He'd started anticipating what she'd ask based on the context of what she was watching or what he was doing or saying at the time to the point that he could and had answered a few of them unprompted.
Ren had never to his knowledge been the most empathetic person in the world, so to find that he just... got not only Nora's questions but flights of fancy and random, childish ideas in the same way he could still pilot a bullhead after months or years of never being behind a control yoke was... disturbing.

Also disturbing were the rare quiet moments. Sometimes, when she thought he was too busy or just plain inattentive to notice her, he caught Nora watching him. It felt like she was expecting something of him, though for the life of him, he couldn't figure out what it was.

It was bad enough that he could hardly look her in the eyes. Those big, deep aquamarine eyes. They brought up deep pain from long ago; from better times and also the worst night of his life; a night he could never talk to anyone about because no one would believe what he'd seen even given the things SHIELD dealt in.

Worse, whenever he looked her in the eye, he got the feeling she knew things he didn't. And that was never a good thing when dealing with an Omega level person of interest.

"Ren, I'm bored," the woman in question declared.

He glanced up from his scroll where he was trying to arrange to get them into the Arc Industries Charity Ball in hopes of finally cornering Jaune Arc. Nora was on her bed, back against the headboard with her legs splayed out in front of her.

Dressed in an over-sized Atlas military t-shirt and a set of loose shorts, she actually looked... wilted from how she usually appeared in her combat outfit. Ren wanted to assure himself it was just the drab gray and cobalt blue of the clothing, but it seemed to actually dampen her spirits when she wasn't decked out in something colorful.

It was almost enough to encourage him to risk taking her clothes shopping. The thought that she might get distracted and run naked through a store or mall or shopping center in the middle and chancing stayed his hand for the time being.

"There are two hundred channels. I'm sure you can find something that interests you."

She shook her head, tossing orange-red locks about her head. "I'm tired of this picture box. You can't touch anything, the people don't talk back to you, and they keep insisting on showing me delicious looking food I cannot eat because the glass keeps getting in the way!"

After ten attempts at explaining the TV, Ren had given up.

"Can't we go somewhere?"

"You got us kicked out of everywhere."

She recoiled briefly from that comment and the acid with which it was said, and recovered slowly, casting her eyes downward. "I said I was sorry. No one told me that animals in a zoo were not for fighting, or that you cannot climb trees in an arbor-rita. Is there really nowhere else we can go? People on the box often go to places where they bring you food, or to little contained meadows or forests in the middle of their cities. Those seem nice and there seem to be many fewer of those 'security guard' people. Also, how was I to know they were guards? They had no swords or spears, only tiny batons!"

Ren sighed and set down his scroll, turning around in his chair to face her. "It's okay, Nora... mostly. A lot of that was my fault. I didn't really understand just how far removed you were from our society, otherwise, I could have warned you what to expect or how to behave."
She nodded quietly, then glanced back up at him. "If we cannot go somewhere, maybe we can just talk about other places. You've been to a lot of other places right, Ren? How about you tell me where you came from?"

His extensive training came into play as he managed to not even wince at the question. "Nowhere," he deadpanned, "next question."

Nora frowned at this and stared at him, tilting her head inquisitively. "Nowhere? But everyone is from somewhere, silly!" If Ren hadn't been blindsided by the question, he might have noticed the tension in her tone.

His jaw clenched. "Not me."

"But..."

"Drop it, Nora. Please."

She blinked a few times, worry lines creasing her face. "Ren, I—"

He got another look at those eyes and something felt like it snapped in his chest. "Drop it." He didn't yell, but his voice was firm and his tone filled with finality. "It doesn't exist anymore. Everyone from it is dead. I... I don't even remember the name of the damn place or anything else about it, so it doesn't matter where I come from, okay?"

It was as if he'd physically struck her. Worse, because he was pretty sure she could take a hit from a truck if need be. But his words seemed to cut deep to the point where she visibly paled and shrank away from him. A sniffle preceded what were sure to be tears.

"Y-you really don't remember anything from that place?" She asked in a small voice.

Deep down, he really didn't want to see her cry. He really didn't want to make her cry, but he'd tried to explain what happened to him the night his town fell under attack and he remembered how they reacted. Even when he omitted the stranger elements, none of them understood.

Every authority figure, so-called friend, and acquaintance he'd ever known. Even his 'partner' at Beacon, for all she tried her damnedest to try to sound understanding. Yeah, but he knew it had to have been her that asked Ozpin himself to intervene with him.

They saw him as obsessed and dangerously driven, out to avenge someone he barely remembered. But he remembered enough. He remembered his best friend even if her name and face had faded. She was important, damn it. Even as a stupid, terrified kid, he'd known that much. For all the use he'd been in the end.

So he felt justified in making it clear from the get-go that that was off limits.

"The old man may have ordered us to be partners, but I'm warning you right now, we are not going to be friends, Nora. We work together, I help you learn about the world, but that's it. No 'sharing' sessions. I've had enough of those, alright? So please, drop it."

He rose from his chair because even as he'd been saying the words, he knew how they'd affect her and he didn't want to be there to face the consequences.

"I need to get some air," he lied and left without another look back.

Nora cried. She didn't remember the last time she'd done so. People didn't cry and Asgard. They
got angry and they hit things, but things in Midgard broke so easily and then Ren got upset and she
didn't want him any more upset than he was right then.

Did he really not remember anything about where he came from? Anything?

That would explain why he never asked where she was from like she'd been hoping: he didn't want
to have to reciprocate.

But her brother had told her he'd be happy to see her. The old man said to give it time, but she
couldn't wait that long! Everything seemed to be going straight into Hel's embrace.

She raised her eyes toward the door and in a tiny voice said, "I re

Chapter End Notes

This took me a while because I wasn't happy with what I was doing. There was this
whole thing about Jaune trying to balance redesigning the Scarab with everything else
going on and it was boring, then there was the 'old friends meet again' stuff that went
on longer and was also boring, and then a scene with Coco that started out fun, but
turned boring and I trashed it all in favor of going back to Ren and Nora and that
scene...

Okay, so there's only so much pathos I can take writing into Ren and Nora because
dammit, Nora is too much fun to keep all sadface. So that's going to resolve next
chapter to Make Nora Fun Again. This is kind of why I was leaning toward doing the
flashbacks, but I think it was still worth it to get Yang on the board. You may now
guess who she's mashed up with.

One more chapter of set-up complete with some more Cinder being Evil because...
Cinder, and we're off to the ball. Who will be the first new villain Cinder creates?
Here's a hint: Ruby rose isn't the only ruby in this story.
Pyrrha liked to think of herself as an honest person. Raised by a diplomat, she'd seen firsthand how much damage dishonesty could cause on a large scale, and her father had passed before he could teach her the value of small, properly applied misinformation, leaving her with a rather incomplete view of the spectrum of dishonesty.

It wasn't until she started work as Jaune's assistant that she started telling untruths, and even then she preferred lies by omission and careful wording.

'I'm sorry, Mr. Arc is currently indisposed,' wasn't exactly a lie, just less specific than 'Mr. Arc is drunk in the living room trying to seduce the women in the various commercials playing on the big screen. Please try to call back around one tomorrow after the hangover has run its course.'

A sizable portion of why she started her crusade to get Jaune to cut back on drinking was because she didn't want to keep covering for him. That and the few times she'd caught him completely in his cups down in the lab, surrounded by multimillion dollar equipment that he might ruin or that might maim him.

Still, she did her best to be completely truthful with her friends.

This was a policy both she and Jaune were now ruing and Pyrrha was starting to reconsider.

Why, oh why had she told Yang the circumstances between she and Jaune's first kiss?

“You better slow down, Jaune. You know living dangerous like this, the car's not the only thing getting revved up.”

“You know, I've been thinking Pyr: maybe we shouldn't spar while I'm here this time. Wouldn't wanna steal you from Jauney Boy.”

“So... are you going to build access panels in the armor just to save time or...”

After latching onto that little tidbit, Yang hadn't stopped quipping for more than ten seconds at a time for the last fifteen minutes. Ruby, sitting behind Jaune, had her face buried in her hands, quietly wishing a sudden case of laryngitis might strike her sister mute for just a few blessed minutes. Jaune was white-knuckling the steering wheel, ears so red they were glowing as he tried to play the teasing off without reaction.

Pyrrha was really wanting that sparring session.

For the fifth time, Yang leaned forward in her seat to put herself in position to whisper in Pyrrha's ear. “Is you armor waterproof? 'Cause it's gonna be real important that it handles constant moist conditions.”

The worst part was that Pyrrha knew that turning around and popping Yang in the mouth would literally make the blonde brawler stronger thanks to her semblance.

Tires screeched and the sports car rapidly decelerated. For Jaune, Pyrrha and Ruby, this just meant they pressed against their seat belts for a second. For Yang, who had unbuckled herself so as to
better pester Pyrrha, this meant she wanged the side of her head against the headrest in front of her.

“Ow! What the?”

“Sorry, stop sign,” said Jaune, unable to hide a wolfish grin.

Yang narrowed her eyes. “You did that on purpose!”

“You'll never be able to prove it.” Jaune taunted, driving off again. “Besides, with your Aura plus your semblance, that barely hurt you at all.”

The message had been sent though and Yang sniffed haughtily. “It is true that I'm the real invincible one here.” She was willing to let him defend Pyrrha, but he was going to have to pay the penalty. “You know your fight was on the news on my flight over. I've gotta ask: the giant spiked piston thing in the shield? Is that compensating for something? Or is the giant sword enough on that front?”

Ruby saw her chance to derail Yang's derail. “You set an Ursa on fire! Were those phosphorus rounds? I wish I could use them in crescent Rose, but they damage the barrel something awful. What are you doing to compensate for that?”

Hearing a grunt of annoyance from Yang at being sidelined, Pyrrha joined in. “He doesn't really. The barrels are just easily replaceable. The new rapid fabricators are great for that, because you can recycle the ruined barrels for about eighty-percent reclamation.”

Seeing her fun being stolen away by a round of nerdage over the new toys, Yang made a face and sat back in her seat. “Fine, you guys win. For now. So Rubes told me you guys have some ass-kicking that needs perpetrating?”

“Humanity First is planning something nasty against a pro-faunus rally. We were planning to intercept them before they did. Then Ruby wanted in and she wanted to bring you in, so here you are,” Jaune explained.

“Also, we get armor.” Ruby said happily.

Jaune made a face, looking at them in the rear-view mirror. “Not this time., Rubes. I mean I can set you up with an artificial muscle suit pretty easily, but coming up with an actual armor that can deal with the speeds you reach... that's going to take time we don't have. I'm barely going to have time to fix some of the errors I made with the Scarab.”

“Aw nuts.” Ruby pouted. “Oh well, me and Crescent... wait, if this is gonna be covert, I can't use Crescent Rose, can I?”

“I'd be more worried about the giant storm of petals of the same flower you're named after.” Yang said with a smirk.

“Pfft.” Ruby waved that idea off. “I figured how to not do that years ago. All I have to do is just not go all out and concentrate. But I never needed to do it before—I mean who doesn't like rose petals? They disappear after a few minutes anyway?”

Yang blinked. “How did I not know this?”

“I didn't think it was important,” Ruby shrugged. “But we're missing the real problem here: how am I supposed to fight without Crescent Rose? My baby isn't just a thing to shoot and decapitate things with—I use it for mobility too!”
Pyrrha hummed in thought. “Well, we haven't worked it all out yet, but we were working on repulser-aided jumps. Would that help? Or, if we can get a suit together for you fast enough, flight.”

“Flights too slow.” Ruby whined.

Beside her, Yang's eyes lit up. “Oh, I've got just the thing in my reclaimer gear!”

Ruby gave her older sister a suspicious look. “You do?”

“Yup.” Yang popped the ‘p’ in the way everyone who knew the sisters from Patch had started doing thanks to them. “I'll show you when we get to our room, but it's part of our emergency mobility kit. They don't build ancient temples like they used to, so we have to carry all sort of gear to get over, under and through collapsed passages, sealed chambers and open shafts.”

“I'm sure you'd know your way all around strange shafts.”

The car went deathly silent as the other three who hadn't spoken all goggled at the speaker. Yang most of all was shocked into silence, biting her quivering lip hard as tears glistened in the corners of her eyes.

Then she couldn't take it anymore. Water cascades down her face and she bawled aloud before grabbing her sister in a tight, joyful hug. “Aw, Ruby! I never knew you had it in you! I-I'm so proud of you!"

“She would have slapped me in the back of the head if I'd said that,” Jaune mused to Pyrrha.

“She would have challenged me to a fight in the middle of the highway,” agreed Pyrrha.

Yang blew a raspberry. “If either of you two dweebs got your knickers out of a twist long enough to be bawdy, I'd be too dead of the fifty heart attacks I would have had to do either of those things.” Then she reached over the seats and ruffled both of their hair. “But we love you because your dorks, not in spite of it.”

Fifteen more minutes of jokes, idle threats and occasional strategizing later, Jaune parked in a lot a few blocks away from Chocolat Boutique and the quartet walked the rest of the way.

Coco's place of business was in the nicest part of the nicest commercial district in Vale; a place where they didn't bother having parking lots because their clients had a driver let them off or else sent the help (and it was never a bad idea to keep the help well-exercised with a little walking).

One couldn't even walk in off the street. There was an intercom next to the door for clients to buzz to announce themselves.

Steeling himself for what was about to happen, Jaune stepped up and pressed the button. A faint buzz sounded somewhere in the building and after exactly a ten-count, there was a burst of static followed by. “Chocolat Boutique. And you are?”

You didn't need polite service when your work was in such high demand, apparently.

“Um, hey. It's Jaune Arc? I made an appointment?”
The voice at the other end let out a sigh that would have suggested she forgot to close the communication relay unless one knew her and understood there was nothing accidental about it. “Okay Arc, in a minute, I am going to buzz you and your party in. But before I do, I want you to know I've instituted a three strike policy.”

“Okay. That doesn't sound all that bad,” Jaune mused, “I've only screwed up once so far.”

“Meaning that if you screw up and disrespect my clothes, I get to strike you three times. And yes, I will hold you to it. The paperwork is already drawn up.”

“Is that really—“

“You wore a clip-on tie with one of my suits at a televised summit when I spent good time and brain power on pairing it with the perfect tie—which you apparently lost.’

There wasn't anything Jaune could say to that. He had indeed lost the tie that went with the suit. To that day he had no idea where it had gotten to. Lucky for him, Pyrrha leaned in to speak while he was searching for words. “Don't worry, I'll make sure he behaves this time.”

After a beat, he voice asked, “And you are...”

“Pyrrha? Pyrrha Nikos. We... met in the Vytal Tournament during your third year?” As soon as the words were out of he mouth, she wished she had them back. She had broken Coco's nose with a shield bash during that match.

To her shock, the reply came in the form of a boisterous cackle. “Oh that's right, I saw you two on the news. How in the world did you end up working for him anyway?”

Blinking in her confusion, Pyrrha managed to say, “I'll be happy to tell you all about it once you let us in.”

Coco continued laughing, but buzzed them in anyway. The main room of Chocolat Boutique was dominated by a raised dais with two marble statues: a man and a woman, sculpted in classical perfection and completely unclothed. They were surrounded by carved stone benches facing outward so that anyone sitting in their shadow was looking in the direction of one of the many glass cases set into the walls containing mannequins wearing pieces from Coco's latest fall collection.

Yang let out a low whistle, eyes focused on the male statue. “Hey Pyrrha—“

“Don't. Start.”

“Aw. You're no fun. All I was gonna say was 'check out the hard body on that one. He's got some seriously sculpted abs."

While Ruby palmed her face in shame and the other two groaned, a scoff came from the other side of the statue. Moments later, Coco Adel strolled into the room. As always, she was casual and fashionable at the same time: a leather vest lined with white fur that ruffed around her neck over a black turtleneck and retro tan bell-bottom trousers. Her high-heeled, calf-length boots clicked on the marble tiles of the floor as she peered at them from behind a pair of stylish shades. A cascade of honey-blonde locks framed her face and the smirk she wore.

“Why or why didn't you warn me I was letting Yang Xiao Long in here. I'm going to have to hire someone to bleach the puns out of the walls now.”
Yang grinned. “You know you love me, CC!”

Ruby waved energetically. “Hi!”

“So... Yang, Ruby, Pyrrha and I know he knows Velvet since she referred him to me. Is Arc some kind of Nexus for Beacon alums?” Coco asked, looking over her four guests.

“Don't forget Weiss!” Ruby piped up. “Oh, and he met Blake when... um... stuff?”

Forgetting himself and his situation, Jaune shrugged nonchalantly. “What can I say? I like to surround myself with exceptional women.” Then he gave a small, self-deprecating smile. “Also Beacon is in Vale.”

Ruby gave an unladylike snort. “You met me and Velvet in Menagerie—Pyrrha too... technically. I guess. And I introduced you to Weiss and Yang. So Vale's got nothing to do with it.”

Deciding that no one was going to acknowledge her joke any further, Yang butted in, strolling up to Coco and throwing an arm around her. “Oh, you don't know the half of the legend of the Capn’ Beacon Booty here. Those two,” she indicated Jaune an Pyrrha, “are totally a thing now.”

While Jaune and Pyrrha suffered a dual attack of the awkward, Coco raise an eyebrow over the top of her sunglasses. “So... is this a case of 'more than meets the eye', or 'no accounting for taste'?”

“Wasn't there a point in time here where I was going to pay you a lot of money for fancy clothes?” Jaune asked. “Can that thing happen now please?”

“And it's definitely a case of 'more than meets the eye'.” Pyrrha added, then had to glare when Yang elbowed Coco in the ribs and pointed at the male statue.

Coco burst out laughing. “Suddenly, this day is looking up. Tell you what, Yang: I'm going to give you a discount on your dress for every time you make one of those two squirm.”

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Jaune groaned and moved closer to Pyrrha. “This is our life now, you realize? These are our friends: They can't be bargained with. They can't be reasoned with. They don't feel pity, or remorse, or fear! And they absolutely will not stop, ever, until we are dead.”

His little speech brought a small smile to Pyrrha's face and she drew closer to give him a kiss on the cheek. “If you feel good enough to make references, t can't really be that bad, can it?”

Ruby, standing not to far away, gave a small laugh while looking on with pity. “I keep forgetting you haven't known Yang as long as we have.”

At the farthest northern edge of Vale's influence, where the rule of the King and council were more of an interesting idea than law, Lay the town of Brightwater.

Before airship technology became dominant, Brightwater had been a prosperous and vibrant port town. In the decades that follow, it had gradually shrank into little more than an overgrown fishing village, sustained only by the ravenous appetite for seafood of their neighbors to the south.

The once-great walls that protected the port still served well enough, so Brightwater played home to few hunters except those passing through, usually catching airships to atlas or Mistral.
No hunters at all frequented the Bell and the Beauty. It was a fisherman's bar pure and simple, perpetually smelling of brine and sweat and fish. It was the kind of place where the background sounds and the evening entertainment were both 'brawl' and if someone wasn't thrown out by nine at night, it was they were closed for some reason.

All this suited the bouncer fine. He was paid good money to kick ass and not think too much, plus after ten he got all the beer he could drink—local brews only—and a plate of whatever the owner's eldest daughter was cooking that night.

It was early in the day yet. The sun was still up and the only patrons were the old drunks who spent most of the day getting deep in their cups while harassing the owner's girls to the very edge of the limits the bouncer set for that kind of thing. If one of the girls called his name, out when the drunk —the door being opened optional.

Rain had set in around midday and was drumming the windows in continual sheets. The sailors wouldn't make much of a catch that day and that meant they'd be surly that night. Prime fight night.

The bouncer kept himself occupied by watching sports from Mistral on his scroll, the comforting weight of his iron mace weighing on his belt.

The door was pushed open behind him, letting in a chill autumn wind and the clattering noise of a rainstorm. He looked over his shoulder to find a mismatched trio that just stank of 'Hunter'.

In the lead was a raven-haired woman with fire-orange eyes. He might have called her beautiful if not for the coldness of her expression. For all the warm colors of her eyes, none of that warmth touched her countenance. She worse a business suit with a skirt that stopped just below the knee, and carried an attache case in one slim hand.

Behind her were a dark-skinned, green haired woman and a man with silver hair. Those two moved to flank the door. The better to stop someone who might try and escape. The bouncer slowly turned around, set down his scroll, and lowered his one hand, the one covered in a thick, leather glove, to the handle of his weapon.

Just because someone was trained as a Hunter didn't mean they were in that line of work, especially after Arc started making them obsolete. Some were mercenaries, others served as local police or bounty hunters. And many turned to lives of crime. Armed with Aura, Dust weaponry and the skills to use them, the only defense against criminal former Hunters were other Hunters of some stripe. They were worse than Grimm: Grimm didn't enjoy it. Grimm usually weren't that smart either.

The leader of the trio walked—no, sashay was the better term as there was no other way to describe the deliberate and dangerous sexual energy she put into the movement—over to the stool beside him and sat the attache case down on it. He thought he'd heard stories that started like this and ended with a guy in a tub full of ice and down one kidney.

“You are a difficult man to find, Cardin Winchester,” she said with a voice like the purr of a big cat.

Cardin kept his hand on his mace and turned to look at her. “Gee, ya think? Livin' at the ass end of nowhere, no contact with my old friends or family—what was your first clue I didn't want to be found?”

The woman rolled her eyes at his outburst. “Please. Spare me the 'woe is me' routine. You got hurt and you ran away because you weren't the biggest and strongest anymore. So you come to a place
where you are the strongest, where you get to knock people around for a living. Now you're a big fish in a little pond.”

She locked eyes with him. “Tell me though: does that make you happy?”

Cardin snorted. “What horse shit is this? Am I happy? I'm alive, aren't I?”

“You didn't answer my question, Mr. Winchester.”

About this time, the middle daughter of the owner, Violetta, noticed the odd instance of Cardin being the one in need of saving and bustled over to the bar. “Excuse me, Miss...”

Never taking her eyes off Cardin, the woman allowed a cruel smile to twist her features as she raised her left hand, which was balled into a fist that glittered with rings on every finger. The crimson gem set into the one on her index finger flashed and unleashed a spiral of fire that ignited the bar.

The young barmaid and two drunks who had been sitting at the bar screamed and leapt back as everyone in the bar came to sudden, frightful attention.

“Everyone out. Now.” the woman with the rings said coldly.

As the patrons and barmaids fled, Cardin rose from his stool and drew his mace. He was being paid to protect this place and by Dust, he was going to do so.

Or try.

The woman focused her gaze on him and leveled her right fist at him. The ring on that index finger sang just before a solid wall of force slammed into Cardin and hurled him into the wall behind him with enough force to rattle his bones.

He tried to rise, but the woman brandished her left hand again, the ring on her thumb glowing white. A great force settled over him, keeping him from rising., making his mace too heavy to lift. Then she twisted her wrist and there was a scream of metal tearing from metal, followed by a scream from Cardin's own throat as his gloved hand, mechanical from elbow to hand, was ripped from his body.

Wracked with pain, she collapsed onto the wooden floor, feeling the heat pressing down on him even as the supernatural weight eased.

The sound of clinking glass caught his attention and he looked up to find that it was the woman's heels tapping the floor as she approached.

“You know this feeling, Mr. Winchester? The feeling of being small? The feeling of being weak and helpless before another? You ran away when your arm got cut off because you never wanted to feel it. You came to this gutter-trash little town so you could be on top again even if it was top of the heap of garbage.”

She crouched next to him. “We both know whose fault it was, don't we? Jaune Arc and his moronic invention. He fired on you and caused that Deathstalker to flinch, ending your career as a Hunter and your dominance. He made almost seven hundred million lien off that invention—and all he did for you was pay for our new arm. Does that sound fair to you?”

“Says the bitch that just tore my arm off.” Cardin grunted.
“No. Says the bitch that is about to make it unnecessary. And make it so you will forever be the strongest man in the room.”

Leaving Cardin with his pain and her words swirling around in his head, she got up and went back to the attache case. He heard the clasps snap open. When she returned, it was with a crimson gem so big that she couldn't wrap her hand all the way around it.

She knelt and put it into his remaining hand—along with an airship ticket.

“When you're ready to stop being weak, take a look deep into the crystal. And when you're ready to get what you're owed, there's your ticket. All you have to do is watch the news to know where Arc will be in the next few days.”

Then she was gone, glass heels clicking on wood until the sound was lost in the crackle of the burning bar.

Cardin looked at her 'gift'. At first he thought it was a chunk of crystalline Burn Dust, but the color was wrong. It was more like a huge ruby. A ruby with something etched under its surface. He brought the gem closer to his face to try and make it out.

There were words, like a poem or something. He felt almost compelled to read aloud.

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“I still think you could have just trusted that one to me.” Mercury complained as he, Cinder and Emerald walked away from the bar.

Cinder rolled her eyes. “Oh yes, that would have been fun: having you under the thumb of an extra-dimensional demon.”

“I fail to see how that's different from my current job, but okay.”

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"Whosoever touches this gem shall possess the power of the Crimson Bands of Cyttorak.” Cardin read slowly, “Henceforth, you who read these words, shall become forevermore a human juggernaut!"

Red light filled his vision and he felt his body begin to change.

Chapter End Notes

So this chapter was 80% Yang making sex jokes, but it had to be done. I have it in my head that Yang and Coco actually ended up doing some missions together between Beacon and the present time. It also amused me to point out how Jaune just kind of fell into knowing so many people from that particular year in Beacon.

My official reasoning is that Remnant being the Deathworld it is, there are probably only a few million humans in the world at best and they rarely move around unless they're Hunters, so those kinds of people will run into each other much more often than normal.
And, of course, we have the debut of our first full villain: Cardin Winchester as the Juggernaut!

Coming up next, we head to the Ball where there will be Schnees, Team Sloth returns, and a special guest star who is an OC only by virtue of being a character mentioned but never named in the series. Don't worry, they have a purpose beyond being super-special. In fact, they aren't a Hunter at all.
Three pairs of eyes watched as Jaune poured a measure of scotch from the limo's minibar into his tumbler. The ice clinked, sounding like an explosion in the sudden silence.

“What?”

Yang's eyes wandered over to Pyrrha. “Weren't you trying to get him to quit last I heard?”

“More like trying to keep him from getting disastrously drunk. It wasn't like he drank all the time even at his worse, it's just that when he did, he went the distance.” She gave the man beside her a sidelong look. “Actually, I think this might be only your third or fourth drink since we got back, right Jaune?”

He nodded, still unsure if one of the three might snatch the drink from his hand. “I've had other things to do more often than not—don't start Yang.” The blonde brawler made a face at him, her quip preempted. “But tonight. Tonight, I'm gonna need this.”

“To loosen up so you can hob-nob?” Yang guessed.

“Because of the death threats?” Ruby suggested.

Jaune goggled at her. “Wow. You know I'd actually almost forgot about that. Better make this one a double.” He reached for the bottle again only to find his hand captured in Pyrrha's, her silk glove disguising the meaningful strength she put in her grip as she gave him a look that politely suggested a single would be enough.

He didn't fight as she lowered their conjoined hands to rest in her lap, but he did take a gulp of the scotch he'd already poured. “Well before I was reminded of just how many people are really excited for my imminent demise, I was gonna say that the Charity Ball tend to attract my least favorite people. You know, the kind of folks that spent all year cutting one another's throats, making their employee's lives a living hell just to squeeze a few extra bucks worth or work out of them and would rather step on an orphan's face than buy them a sandwich, then turn up at my party, toss in a few bucks and call it even as far as karma's concerned? Yeah. And they all think I'm just like them. And want to talk to me about it.”

Turning to Pyrrha, he gave her a pleading look. “If it's all the same to you, I'd appreciate it if you were suddenly very needed and wanted to dance as much as possible.”

She hummed thoughtfully and gave him a smile. “I think that can be arranged.”

Yang, who had taken the whole of the rear seat of the limo to herself, sprawled lazily on the leather. “If you ask me, none of that's your biggest worry.”

“This should be good.” Ruby commented with a giggle.

Ignoring her, Yang continued. “The way I see it, you two are pretty much superheroes now right? Jaune glanced back at the supposedly soundproof glass between his and Pyrrha's backs and the driver's cabin. He hadn't had a hand in designing it and hadn't seen the specs, so he didn't trust it.
“Yang! Ixnay on the eros-hay!”

This too was ignored because when Yang Xiao Long had something she thought was insightful to say, by Dust, she was going to say it. “And if comics, television and movies have taught us anything, it's that pretty much any big event in your lives from here on out will be doomed to some sort of dramatic turn of events. Oh, tonight will probably be something small: a hostage situation, maybe a ticking time-bomb. But by the holiday system, there'll be evil Santas, and then talking gorillas. Then the next thing you know it's your wedding day and Bam! Ruby turns evil and makes out with everyone as a way of implanting them with pieces of a demon's soul!”

Ruby squeaked. “I'm going to what now? Why would I turn evil?”

“Did she say talking gorillas?” asked Pyrrha. Then she grabbed Jaune's half empty tumbled and drained it. “I'm sorry, but I needed it after hearing... whatever that was.”

“You don't see me arguing.” Jaune shrugged, “But from experience, I can tell you that no amount of alcohol will make it make sense.” He gave Yang a pointed look. “You have fun coming up with that one?”

She saluted. “Just doin' my job. Being covered by the blood-sucking leeches you call high society for a night doesn't seem quite so bad now does it?”

Jaune opened his mouth to say something, thought a bit, then shook his head. “No, this is till going to be horrible.”

“And soon.” Yang said, looking out the tinted window. “We're here. Little sister, remember what was discussed.” Ruby gave a sharp nod. They weren't just there for moral support (or to represent the Atlas military in Ruby's case). With the aforementioned death threats and the fact the Pyrrha would be there as Jaune's date instead of his bodyguard, they were providing their friend a measure of extra security.

As such, they would be exiting the limo first. Yang would scope out potential trouble in the crowd while Ruby, as a sniper, was the obvious choice to looked out for enemy snipers.

“Excellent. Synchronize sunglasses.” It had taken three hours of cajoling and two thousand of Jaune's lien, but Coco had provided the sisters from Patch designer sunglasses just for this moment. As one, they retrieved their glasses from their bags, flicked them open and donned them with a nod to one another.

When the car stopped, Yang got out first, stepping onto the literal red carpet leading into the Capital City Hotel's ball room entrance. She made a show of tossing her hair as she emerged. Her dress was a rich buttery yellow, sleeveless, ankle length and slit to the thigh on either side. Over it, she wore a brown velvet coat cut so it came down to her waist where it was secured by a segmented gold belt (Coco promised to invoke the three strikes policy should Yang wear 'her baby'). The belt matched the bracers at her wrists: Ember Celia.

For hunters, who might be called upon for help at any time, their weapons were always considered proper attire, so all three women were thusly armed. As Crocea Mors was his ancestral weapon, Jaune was permitted to wear it as well.

Clear.” Yang said as she strode up the red carpet. One thing they'd all agreed on was wearing earbuds with bone induction mics to keep in touch throughout the Ball just in case something happened.
Ruby slipped out of the limo next, wobbling a little on even the short heels she'd been given. Her dress was satin of a red so dark its true shade could only be seen where the light caught it just right and it was cut so it terminated just after flaring out just below the knee. At Ruby's insistence, she also had a hooded cloak, though it was white with a red silk lining and a border of thorns and roses. She had the hood down, but the cloak encompassed her well enough to completely conceal Crescent Rose hanging from its harness at her lower back. As one last embellishment, Coco had added a choker in the shape of a rose blossom at the young woman's throat.

Jaune started to move to the rear door of the limo only to notice he wasn't being followed. Pyrrha remained seated, chewing at her lips with a blank expression on her face. “Everything... okay?”

She blinked, then shook her head. “I'm sorry. It's just... I hadn't thought of it before: the red carpet, the press, the flashbulbs. It just took me to a place I didn't want to be for a minute.”

Taking a look out of the tinted windows, Jaune saw what she meant. It had been almost a decade since she’d been expressly pushed into the limelight, and here he was about to drag her onto a red carpet in front of half the Vale media. He set down on the side seat and turned to fully face her.

“Pyrrha... if you don't want to do this, you don't have to I kinda have to be there, but I'll just tell the driver to take you home. But, I wanted you to know that if you do decide to do this, it won't be like it was before. You won't be alone. I'll be right there beside you. Heh, and you've seen my rap in the press enough to know that nothing that has to do with me is ever getting put up on a pedestal. They only one who ever did that... was apparently you. I still don't know what you were thinking.”

Normally his self-deprecation would have worried her, but this time Pyrrha could tell he wasn't mocking himself, just doing his best in his way to reassure her. It worked, but every pop of a flashbulb outside was working against that.

Still, she drew herself up and straightened her back, remembering their earlier talk of her 'rescuing' him from having to talk to his so-called peers. No amount of bad memories were going to keep her from spending the night dancing with him; not after they were finally together.

“I suppose it will be different with someone by my side,” she said, slowly adding more certainty to her voice.

Jaune flashed her a bright smile. “I promise you won't regret this. And an Arc always keeps his promise.”

He exited first. For him, Coco had supplied a dazzling white tailcoat with golden piping and a robin's egg blue silk shirt and a matching handkerchief sticking out of the breast pocket. The tie was white with a golden pin in the form of the twin arcs of his family sigil. A black leather sword belt with a golden buckle also depicting his sigil secured Crocea Mors to his person.

As panicked as he could be leading up to it, Jaune was a natural showman when given a crowd. He popped out of the limo and extended his arms as if he'd just stuck a landing, prompting a sea of camera flashes and shouted questions. He gave them a second to wear themselves out before turning and offering a hand to Pyrrha, helping her (unnecessarily) out of the car.

Her gown was cut on the bias, one side falling in folds down to her feet while the other rose to mid-thigh. It was a deep, but vibrant red shot through with bronze patterns that resembled the patterns on marble, leading up to a corset-style top and the only plunging neckline among the three gowns. After some discussion, Pyrrha had opted to wear her own jewelry: her bronze cornet with the hanging emeralds on her head, and a pendant with a thumb-sized piece of jade shaped like a tear.
Pyrrha had also been the only one of the three women who submitted to getting her hair done. Yang straight out refused to let a strange touch her hair, and Ruby had opted to sleep in rather than hit the salon. Her new hairstyle replaced her normal ponytail with an elaborate updo that was more like a graceful sculpture in the medium of 'braids' than a simple hairstyle. The hairdresser hadn't known whether to bless or curse his luck when he'd seen the sheer volume of hair he had to work with.

Jaune offered his arm and she threaded hers through it, prompting another series of camera flashes. Giving measured nods and waves to the onlookers, the couple made their way along the red carpet and up the stairs into the ballroom.

Passing through the doors was like going through an airlock; the noise and commotion outside stopped, replaced by the low roar of a more well-mannered crowd. Soft music played in the background as waiters circulated with platters of wine, champagne and other libations.

“See? That wasn't so bad, right?” Jaune asked, trying not to acknowledge how he was starting to loose the feeling in the arm Pyrrha was holding on to. Not for the first time, he shuddered at how bad things must have been to give Pyrrha such anxiety about being in the public eye.

After a bit, the pressure on his arm let up and Pyrrha let out a breath. “As long as this isn't a constant thing, I can deal with it.”

“Thanks.” Jaune shifted his arm out of her hold to slip it around her waist. “Now let's hope we at least get a breather before...”

“Well if it isn't the man who made me ten million lien!”

“Ah crap.” Jaune turned to find Roman Torchwick approaching. Social legitimacy had made the man even more of a peacock than he'd been as a gangster ('alleged gangster', as his lawyers would insist). This evening, he was decked out in all-white everything save for his signature bowler hat, ever-present cigar, and his cane. Behind him came his chief enforcer-now-personal assistant, Neo, a woman a little younger than Ruby decked out in an old-fashioned layered hoop dress with tons of fiddly lace and a parasol.

Before Jaune could react, Torchwick was on him, throwing an arm over his shoulder so he couldn't graciously escape the gloating. “Why didn't you tell me you were bowing out of the munitions game? It would have given me time to up production. You know how desperate people are to load up on kill-fuel when they think there's going to be a shortage.”

“It's a shipment stoppage, not a cancellation of our lines,” Jaune ground out.

“Whatever it is, it's lasted weeks and lined my pockets in a serious way. Between you pulling that crap and Schnee over there offering me five times the going rate for my stores of aircraft quality aluminum and titanium and I am having a very good year.” He puffed a cloud of smoke into Jaune's face. “Feels like the good old days.”

He grunted as a parasol prodded him in the ribs. “The good old days that for legal reasons I was not involved in.” It was then and only then that he noticed Pyrrha. “Say, weren't you his bodyguard last year?”

“Things have changed since then,” Pyrrha said concisely, then made a show of looking the opposing pair up and down. “Which is more than I could say for you two.”

Torchwick took a moment to process this, before bursting out into laughter. “More than—oh, Miss
Nikos, you're reading this entirely wrong. Me and this one?" He gestured back to a Neo who was, herself shaking with mute giggles. "I took her off the street, practically raised her. I may have allegedly been a criminal, but that's just wrong."

As it was, Jaune had only been half listening for a while. "Hold on. Roman... when you say 'Schnee over there'... you mean in Atlas, right? Please say you mean 'over there' in the sense that seven thousand miles that way is 'over there'."

Torchwick gave him a wicked smirk. "No, I mean over there as in 'next to hi two daughters chatting up the mayor of Vale.'"

Jaune's back went rigid. "Oh, Dust. Wilhelm Schnee is... here. In Vale. At my ball." Torchwick forgotten entirely, he turned to his paramour. "How is this happening? How did I not know that the owner of the SDC—of half of Atlas and the scariest person I know including my terrifying business partner was going to be here?"

"I think the guest list was finalized while we were still missing." Pyrrha guessed. The list would have usually come to Jaune for him to look over and finalize things, but it had never shown up for that year.

"Okay." Jaune said slowly. "We just... avoid him. For the next three hours. There's a lot of people here. We can do this."

Torchwick gave Neo an aside glance. "Now if you'll look closely, you'll see the legendary bravery of the Arc family line—buried way down under all that cowardice. No wonder his mother called him 'yellow'."

"Actually, his name is 'yellow' for the color of the device in the traditional Arc heraldry where it symbolizes boldness and protection. His great-grandfather was also named Jaune, so the name should hold nothing but pride for him.”

Jaune almost choked upon hearing that voice and whirled around to see the speaker, which in turn mean dragging Pyrrha around such that she almost collided with Torchwick. His eyes fell upon a woman with short-cropped blonde hair and eyes the same shade of blue as his own.

His eyes widened and all thoughts of Schnees or Torchwick fled his mind. "Blanche?" for the first time since they'd arrived, he let go of Pyrrha and stepped toward the newcomer. "What are you doing here? Did something happen? Is everyone okay?"

As soon as he stepped into her range, Blanche Arc, the eldest scion of House Arc reached out and slapped her baby brother up side the head. '"Did something happen?' Do you really have the nerve to ask that after the whole family spent the better part of a month thinking you were killed by terrorists?! And then we find out that you're fine not because you call one of us and tell us, but because we get news about you crashing your company's stock price or something?"

Jaune shrunk back from her. "I didn't think..."

"What? You didn't think we'd care?" Blanche kept her voice even so as not to make a scene, but every word was acid. "I will remind you, Jaune Arc that you are the one that left the family. The family left you. No matter what you think of father--""

At last, Jaune shot back. "You'll defend him. After what he did."

Blanche narrowed her eyes. "You act as if he killed someone."
“He did.” Jaune hissed, “The Arc family honor. He promised me, Blanche. I made him swear. And he lied to me. I wish he’d left me believing he’d been working with criminals!” With the last word, he gestured to Torchwick, who threw his hands up.

“As amusing as it was to play my part in your family drama by... not playing any part at all, you’ll remember that I in no way did anything back then, so you can just leave me out.” He huffed and turned away from them. “Come on, Neo.” with that, the two not-criminals left.

The Arcs paid no attention. Blanche folded her arms. “You and I both know he did what he did because he loves you. He still loves you. It would be him here right now if he wasn’t sure you’d have security throw him out over this foolish tiff.”

Jaune looked away, scowling. “He did what he did for the family line, because I was the only son, because none of you wanted to be hunters and Vert and Gris were too young. After I failed the gain admittance at Sanctum and Shade, he got desperate.” He was almost spitting by the time he’d said his piece.

“It was a slip. Like you said, he was desperate—desperate to make you happy, Jaune. He did it for you, not his pride of legacy. And the thanks he gets is you cutting off communication to the entire family! Do you think we all deserved that?”

“Cut you—I’ve seen gifts and cards for every birthday, every holiday. I never missed on in the past nine years. What about that makes you think I cut you off?”

“The part where you sent gifts, but none of us, nor mother have actually talked to you in all that time.”

Jaune started to say something in response but stopped short. Blanche was right: he hadn't been there for the family in the ways that counted. Because he was too angry. Because he wanted to forget both his father's failings and his own. Mostly his own.

As he struggled for words, a gentle hand touched his arm. “Jaune?” If it was possible, he felt worse all of a sudden, recalling how he’d told Pyrrha more than once that she was all the family he had left. True in some ways, but he’d never elaborated that that was by choice. Selfish, prideful choice. He stiffened at her touch and that prompted her to give his bicep a reassuring squeeze that did little.

Blanche ended up being the one to reply to Pyrrha's entry into the discussion. “Ah, forgive my manners. You must be Pyrrha Nikos. I guess I have you to thank for bringing him back home safe and sound.” She extended her hand. “I'm Blanche Arc, Jaune's oldest sister. I manage the smithy back home.”

Taking the hand with her free one, Pyrrha gave a polite nod. “It's nice to meet you. Jaune... doesn't speak much about his family.”

It was like a spike of ice in his heart. Jaune found himself still unable to talk.

“I'm sorry we had to meet under these circumstances, Miss Nikos.”

“Please, just call me Pyrrha.”

“Pyrrha then. I wish we could had met over coffee somewhere less public, but the family sent me to make sure he really was alright. There's rumors in the papers and all about how he's suffering PTSD from his... experience and that's why he's made the choices he's made recently. We wanted to see for ourselves—to see if he needed us.”
Hesitating, Pyrrha looked to Jaune to see if he'd speak up, only to find him staring at the floor. “I can assure you that all of his decisions have been made after careful deliberation, Ms. Arc.”

“If I’m to call you Pyrrha, you really should call me Blanche.”

“Very well. Jaune saw things while we were held captive. Not in the sense that they scarred him, but in the sense that they drove him to action. In his own words, the White Fang exist because of the conditions the faunus live under. His new policy is meant to change that.”

Blanche regarded her brother with interest upon hearing this. “Is that true, Jaune? Not that I don't trust your... I'm sorry, the television said you were his personal assistant, I've heard you were his bodyguard... and yet neither of those seem accurate.”

Finally, Jaune found his voice. “They're all accurate. Pyrrha and I have worked closely together for years now. We've been the best of friends and recently, we've sort of become more.” He cleared his throat before proceeding, hoping to steamroll over the hows and whens of that. “As for the faunus question: yes. There's no justification for how people treat them and it's time for that to change.”

A flicker of a smile touched Blanche's face. “See? Now that's actual honor, Jaune. Father would never say it out loud, but we earned our name because great-great-grandfather killed heaps of monsters and men to get us there. Honor wasn't even a thing the Arcs knew until what our great grandparents did in the War. I think I can say with complete certainty that the family will be one hundred percent behind you on this once you call and tell them.”

“Blanche, I am not...”

“I'm not sure exactly what happened,” Pyrrha cut in, “but it really does sound like you should talk to them. If you don't want to speak with your father, then don't. But don't punish your mother or your sisters, Jaune.”

He groaned, knowing that between the two of them, he wasn't winning this argument. “Look... I'll think about it, okay? I have a lot of things going on right now, Blanche. That change of policy I made? Yeah, that's resulted in death threats. Plus I've got people sifting through years of orders trying to get our munitions shipping back on schedule and... other projects...”

“It would be the former matters where I would have words with you.”

“Oh no.” Jaune said quietly. “Why are people sneaking up on me constantly tonight?” He turned slowly to find himself face-to-face with Wilhelm Schnee and his daughters.

The patriarch of the Schnee family wasn't very tall, a few inches shorter than Jaune himself, but he made up for it by being imposing in other ways. His face was square-jawed and looked as if it had been carved out of a white opal for all the color it lacked. A white mustache, meticulously groomed, obscured his mouth when he spoke, and his white hair was slicked back with brutal efficiency. He wore a suit that cost more than Jaune's company bullhead with the Schnee snowflake sigil on the cuffs and the back.

To his right, standing just behind him was Winter, the older daughter. She was wearing her Atlas military dress whites with her twin swords at her hip. Her eyes were alert and focused directly on Jaune. To his left was Weiss, also in dress whites, but with a layered skirt rather than trousers, a uniform concession made to defer to her status as a fully licensed Huntress. Her rapier, Myrtenaster, hung from her hip, the revolver chamber glowing in myriad colors from the high quality Dust inside. She was looking away, as if she wanted to be anywhere else at the moment.
“If you are quite done airing your Arc family drama in the public eye that is.” Wilhelm's voice was as slick as his hair with a slight hint of gravel from his advancing age.

Jaune refused to rise to the bait and did his best to straighten himself out. “Wilhelm. I didn't expect to see you are one of my shindigs. What brings you down from your tower all the way in Atlas to mingle with the more common rich folks?”

“Recent event necessitated I take a more direct hand in our dealings. Previously, I assumed Weiss could handle your... unique intellect, but you've proven that the velvet glove is not firm enough to keep you in line.”

Blanche looked to Jaune. “Do you work for him or something?”

“Not the last time I checked,” he said, frowning, “Oh. By the way, Wilhelm Schnee, these are my sister Blanche and my girlfriend, Pyrrha Nikos. Blanche, Pyrrha: this is my company's former Dust supplier, Wilhelm Schnee of the Schnee Dust Company. He seems to have forgotten that I bought things form him, not the other way around.”

That made Schnee's mustache twitch as his fury mounted. Instead of pressing on from that direction though, he went for a different tactic. His eyes went to Pyrrha and narrowed. “As yes. Your 'girlfriend'. It seems that I was first introduced to Ms. Nikos as your employee. Even then, I was heartbroken to see how far the mighty have fallen: baby sitting the stunted whelp of a defunct line after amassing such glory as a Champion in the Mistral and Vytal tournaments. But to see you stooping to gold-digging, my dear.... well that leaves me truly depress—“

He didn't get to finish as Jaune stepped up to him, dangerously close. “Don't.” he said coldly. It was only when he saw the spark of triumph in the older man's eyes did he realize his mistake.

A grip like an iron vice closed over his arm, sending pain lancing through it. Winter stepped past them, interposing herself between the two and Blanche and Pyrrha, one hand resting on the hilt of a weapon. “They're just having a word,” she said quietly.

“No,” Wilhelm spat, leaning close to Jaune's ear. “You. Don't. Boy. You do not tell me what I can and cannot do. And I don't care how you treat the animals that work for you, but you also do not dictate how I treat them in mine or threaten to break business deals with me over it.

The faunus's lot in life is the way it is for a reason: it makes me money. If I treated them like humans, they'd expect to be paid like a human or given benefits like a human. They raise labor costs and that either comes out of my pocket, or the consumer's. Higher prices mean people buy less Dust, so that's still money out of my coffers. So the faunus stay in their place. If they try to rise, or someone helps them try to rise... well there will be consequences, as you well know. It would be a shame, Mr. Arc if your friend Ruby were to lose her position in the military for whatever reason, yes? She is only there by Weiss's good graces after all.”

Or maybe the Arc family smithy and the farm suffer major setbacks in supply shipments—or bad press that sends customers fleeing.” He leaned in closer, “Or one of those threats against you comes true and someone takes a shot at you—only to hit Ms. Nikos instead.” Jaune tried to struggled free of the grip, to say something, but Wilhelm Schnee's grip was ironclad.

“Just keep this in mind, Boy: you are rich. I am wealthy. There is a difference; a difference that make governments turn in my direction, that can make things happen without ever leading back to me. That is why when I release you, you will smile as if we just had a friendly, fruitful conversation and in the morning, you will reinstate every contract you have with the SDC. Do we understand each other?”
Grinding his teeth into a reasonable facsimile of a smile, Jaune nodded and was thrust away from the Schnee patriarch for his trouble.

Schnee smiled, making his mustache crinkle and spoke loudly enough that everyone around could heard. “Excellent! I'm glad we see eye-to-eye. Now if you'll excuse me, I think I saw Spruce Willis over there. I wish to speak with him—perhaps convince him to play my person in my bio pic!”

He turned and walked away, Winter in two. Weiss hang back, catching Jaune's eye. “I warned you what would happen if you crossed him, you dolt.”

Jaune grimaced and moved back to stand beside Pyrrha, taking her hand without looking. “Yeah, well he's gotta know this isn't over.”

“What happened” Pyrrha asked.

“Nothing much: Schnee threatened everyone I cared about with destitution or worse if I don't give him back his contracts. That reminds me...” He whipped out his scroll with his free hand. “Glynda, be a dear and cancel all ongoing transactions with the SDC, even those currently being shipped.”

The next thing he knew, Weiss was in his personal space. “Are you insane!? That would be declaring open war on him!”

“He seems to have fired the first shot.” Blanche supplied, watching the other two Schnees moving away through the party.

There was a flurry of rose petals and something slammed into Weiss hard enough to almost knock her down. “Weiss! Oh my gosh, I didn't expect to see you here! When did you get into town, are you staying long? We have to hang out! Yang is here too, so it could almost be a Team RWBY reunion except Blake's not here. But we've got Jaune and Pyrrha... and some blonde lady I don't know. It'll be great!”

While Ruby bombarded her old partner with words, Jaune took a long, cleansing breath. He wanted to sit down. Are the open bar. Forever.

Pyrrha leaned over to him. “Are you alright?”

“Just a lot of things happening at once,” Jaune lamented. “I'll be fine. Promise. I just hope nothing else terrible happens. Though right now I could really go for Yang's talking gorillas.”

RWBY

Nora was in better spirits. In fact, she was in amazing spirits!

Ren had bought her the most beautiful pink gown and took her to this beautiful feast hall where they had the most wonderful food and drink and the most interesting people! The only thing that would have made it better would have been if he'd been paying attention to her instead of trying to find Jaune Arc again.

Oh well, that just meant there was no one keeping her away from the smorgasbord. “So you call these 'shrimp puffs'?” She was asking the man standing on the other side of the table wearing a puffy hat and apron. “I didn't even know shrimp could breathe, living underwater and all, but to find out that when you get them out of breath the result is delicious? I'm learning so much today! Do shrimp huffs taste good two or is that something like a waste product?”

The man, who was apparently named Chef based on what other people were calling him, was
showing immense patience. “No Miss. These aren't puffs from shrimp. They're made from shrimp and puff pastry.”

Nora blinked. “Oh. That makes a lot more sense! You must think I'm an idiot, huh? Of course shrimp don't puff. They live underwater! You can't breath water. Doy, Nora! So I'm guessing that the pigs in the blanket are not actually pigs, right? Because those would have to be some really tiny pigs. And I know there's potbellied pigs, but they're not that little...”

Not far from here, there was a commotion from the entrance from the hotel to the ballroom as a positively huge man in an ill-fitting suit pushed his way past the attendants watching those doors. He looked around the room as if searching for someone, then his eyes lit on the buffet. Grabbing a plate, he ambled over and started grabbing things seemingly at random. It didn't take him long to where Nora was talking the chef's ear off.

“Wow, you're kinda huge, aren't you? Like as big as Volstagg, only not fat. No, you're all muscly like Heimdal. Oh! You're like is Volstagg and Heimdal had a baby! That's so cool! You wanna shrimp puff?”

The big man could only stare at her for a beat, completely lost.

Nora didn't even notice. “Interesting fact: they aren't made from shrimps puffing on anything. They're actually made from shrimp!”

About that time, Ren emerged from the crowd, shooting an apologetic look to the chef. “Nora, I found Arc. Let's hurry up and get to him before someone else talks to him.”

“Okay Ren!” Nora started to follow as he turned away, only to dash back to the table, grab a handful off shrimp puffs and cram them into her mouth before hefting Magnhild and skipping after him.

As for the big man, his appetite was suddenly gone. Dark whispers and the image of an etched crimson gem filled his head. “Arc's here.” He muttered to himself, tossing the plate aside. It was time to get what he came for.

Chapter End Notes

So Blanche. The thing about RWBY is that sometimes it can be both very specific and incredibly vague in some places and unlike other fandoms I write in like Teen Titans, there's no other source material to draw from for answers. I don't like using OCs, but in cases like this, where we know Jaune has both parents and seven sisters, but nothing about them... I've gotta do what I've gotta do. Thus Blanche.

This ties into the divergence point for this AU, where Jaune never went to Beacon. I'll leave you to speculate on why he didn't go and why he's so upset with his father for now.

In a similar vein to Blanche is Mr. Schnee. We actually don't even know if that's him Weiss is sitting next to in the Vol 3 finale, so all bets are still off. If you couldn't tell before, he's a major baddie coming from the business angle. Most of his characterization come from the East India Trading Company who, as it turns out are largely responsible for racism as it exists in America today: fostering the idea that
certain groups were less than human all so they could keep their low-cost labor. I can't help but imagine that's the reason behind faunus discrimination on Remnant too because we haven't seen any attempts by anyone to actually justify it beyond 'they're animals'.

I'm not sure how many people are going to be upset about how I'm treating the Neo/Torchwick thing, but I feel this works well, especially for the direction I'll very eventually take them. I know it's not in the Marvel universe, but I'm imagining Torchwick as a Penguin-like figure: he's legit, but if you need something illegal done, whether you're good or bad, he's your guy. Less a villain and more a slimy frenemy like Eddie Haskle.

Oh, and speaking of the Distinguished Competition, whoever can identify where Yang's little scenario for Jaune and Pyrrha's wedding comes from gets a shiny no-prize.

This was a lot of place-setting for next chapter, but I hope people enjoyed a bit of drama. Also, this is the last 'someone finds out Jaune and Pyrrha are together' reaction set too because that got so very old. Now that we're through that, we can finally just deal with them as a couple. Right after...
“I can now honestly say I understand what you mean about having other things to deal with right now.” Blanche frowned at the back of Wilhelm Schnee's head from across the ballroom as the older man continued to mingle with the other guests. “Do you want me to call the family? Gris is nearby—I bet you didn't know she's in her second year at Beacon.”

Jaune flinched at the little barb, but shook his head. “Actually, I do. I keep tabs on you guys in private... just in case you need some help.”

The elder Arc's eyes narrowed. “That sound astoundingly hypocritical of you.”

“I never promised I wouldn't,” Jaune pointed out.

Pyrrha gave him a curious look. “You are going to explain this to me later, right?”

“He better explain it to all of us.” Ruby was draped over Weiss's back, hugging her partner's neck from behind while looking for all the world like a koala. It helped the image that while Weiss had grown considerably taller since their years at Beacon, Ruby... hadn't. Not by much. “Who is Gris? If she's a student at Beacon, maybe I know her—what's her weapon? Is it something cool like a chainsaw that's also a flamethrower? Also, who is this blonde lady? You seem to know each other really well.”

Jaune sighed. “Oh. Right. Ruby, Weiss. This is my sister, Blanche.”

“Oh my gosh!” In an explosion of rose petals, Ruby detached herself from Weiss and rushed directly into Blanche's personal space, leaving her partner stumbling to avoid falling over from the gust of wind that accompanied the maneuver.

“How is it that you still haven't grown up at all, you dolt?” Weiss complained, but Ruby wasn't paying any attention.

“You're one of Jaune's sisters? Are you one of the ones who taught him how to cook or to dance, or knitting?” Ruby barraged the other woman with questions.

“Knitting?” Pyrrha asked.

Rubbing the back of his head, Jaune muttered, “Crochet and needlepoint actually. But I'll have you know it's both relaxing and creative!”

“How come I've never seen you do those since I've been practically living with you for the past couple of months?”

“Because of this exact conversation I wished never to have.”

Pyrrha's last comment didn't escape Blanche, who pinned Jaune with a look. “You've been living with her for the past few months?”

“Oh look, my night has gone from scary to awkward in thirty seconds. I'm kind of wishing the scary would come back.” No sooner were the words out of his mouth than someone tapped him on
the back. “Oh come on! I was just kidding!” He lamented while turning around. When he saw who it was, however, he let out a long sigh of relief. “Of it's you, the Lie Ren guy.”

Ren blinked, not having expected that response. “Um... right. Mr. Arc, I was wondering...”

“You know what? Now is the perfect time. We are going to go somewhere private right now and we're going to take for all three hours of this party about my and Pyrrha's escape.” Jaune grabbed Ren's wrist and started looking around for a place for that talk.

He ended up walking into what he first thought was a wall. Only when he bounced off and looked up did her realize it was a man. A very big man. “Whoa. Dude, you are huge. What kind of workout gets that kind of results because sign me up!”

The big man loomed over him; actively loomed. His jaw set firmly as he ground out. “Well first step is to have some rich asshole let a Deathstalker cut your arm off.”

“Wait. What?” Jaune let go of Ren and stared up at the man. He certainly didn't recognize the mountain of muscle and he was pretty sure he didn't know the face—at least not that well. But the story... “No...” he breathed. “The guy from Menagerie? Ah jeez, what was your name? Carson? Carlton?”

“Cardin Winchester?” It took Jaune a second to realize that Pyrrha, who had stepped up next to him wasn't making a suggestion, she recognized the guy. “Dust, what's happened to you?”

Cardin rumbled out a growl. “Why don't you ask Arc here? It's all his fault. It started with him doing his test knowing my team was still out there.”

“Hey, I had no idea you guys were there until the Deathstalker attacked!” Jaune defended.

“My team checked with some of the trainees that were there.” Cardin's fists clenched, drawing attention to the fact that they were girded in bands of some sort of red metal. “One of them told one of your people about us.”

Jaune boggled at that. “I never heard anything about that! And besides, I had to fire Helios that day: that thing was going to kill you! Yeah, I felt bad that it cut your arm off—that's why I paid for your replacement. Heck, I went to meet you at the hospital the day you were due for a follow-up to offer to build you a better one, but you never showed.”

It was only then that a key detail sunk in for Jaune. “Wait... what happened to your hand? That's either the most amazing prosthetic ever invented or...”

“I got a better one.” Cardin reared back with one giant fist.

What happened next happened in a a flurry of chaos. Jaune felt Pyrrha throw an arm over his shoulder and pull him backward while at the same time her free hand snapped forward. He had no idea where she'd been concealing them in the gown, but in the next moment, a storm of dear shot, each one rimed in the black power signature of her semblance lanced out to strike Cardin center mass—where they flattened like they'd just hit a slab of solid steel.

As The mighty fist started to come forward, white light filled the air, twisting and transforming into the telltale shape of the Schnee hereditary glyphs. Jaune had never seen them in action, but Ruby had told him all about their various modes: altering the direction of gravity, acceleration, deceleration, summoning, and forming solid planes of force.

This one must have been a deceleration glyph; as for a moment, as Cardin's fist impacted it, it
looked like his punch was going to be spent against the aura-generated power of the glyph. Then the white light shattered like glass. Weiss let out a shriek as the fist hooked past Jaune and Pyrrha, missing them by scant inches.

Not one to miss an opening, Pyrrha released Jaune and pushed him behind her while drawing out Milo and Akouo. She barely had the time to get her shield up before Cardin's backhand struck it and sent her flying with almost casual ease.

“Pyrrha!” Jaune shouted, watching in horror as she crashed down on the tile floor and rolled to a stop next to the wall, looking dazed. Running on pure instinct and rage, he drew Crocea Mors and expanded the shield, looking only to pay the giant back for what he'd done.

An arm hooked around his shield arm and in a flash, his world became rose petals until he found himself stumbling to a stop next to his fallen girlfriend, who was getting to her feet.

“This? This is so not the fight you want to be your first.” Ruby explained even as she pulled out Crescent Rose. “Let the actual Hunters deal with this.”

Jaune took stock of the actual Hunters. Pyrrha was still looking shaky even as she got to her feet. Weiss, thank Dust, had grabbed Blanche and used a glyph to transport her to the other side of the room and out of danger. Winter (who Jaune wasn't even sure was a Huntress) was ushering her father out through the hotel entrance to the ballroom. Lie Ren had backed off the moment the first punch was thrown and drawn a pair of machine pistols with bladed stocks. He was circling around Cardin, taking stock of the threat he posed. His pink-clad partner had her hammer out and was fidgeting with it, casting nervous glances at Ren.

That just left... Oh, Dust.

Yang Xiao Long, downed the flute of champagne in her hand and tossed it aside, then shoved the young man in an expensive suit she'd been shmoozing with out of her way to clear a path for her to strut up to Cardin, who was trying to figure out where Jaune had gone. As she approached, she kicked off her shoes and made a show of taking off her earrings.

“Well, well, well. If it isn't Cardin Winchester. I told Jaune there's be talking gorillas and check it out: I was right!”

The huge man turned his head to glare at her. “Xiao Long.”

“Oh, you remember me!” Yang reached down and pulled at the hem of her skirt. Hidden velcro panels gave way, allowing her to tear part of it away to reveal she'd been wearing a set of loose tan boxer's trunks underneath it the whole time. Coco thought of everything, including the high probability of Yang having to get into a brawl at a society party. She dropped her fists to the sides, allowing her Ember Celica to fully unfold and lock over her knuckles.

Now fully ready for some impending violence, she swiped her thumb across her nose in a dismissive gesture and sent into a lose stance, bouncing on the balls of her feet. It was hard for even people close to her to tell, but Yang was not as undisciplined and uncontrolled as she had been in school. She'd taken her time traveling the world to actually learn boxing for one. Also Muy Tai. And Caporea.

“And if you do remember me, you know what come next!”

What came next was Cardin throwing a fist as big as head head at her chest. Twisting to the side, Yang dodged as if she were dancing with him. His left cross came around and she bounced back so
it missed her by the slightest of margins.

“Welcome to the party, pal!” She roared as she closed on him. “Try the punch!” She swung a left
cross of her own into his armpit, her Ember Celica enhancing the strike with a booming shotgun
blast. Neither did a thing, and Yang was forced to duck low to avoid Cardin’s answering blow
before popping back up to deliver a trio of shotgun-boosted jabs to his gut that might as well have
been playful slaps.

When she dodged back this time though, she found she wasn't escaping a punch but a clap. Cardin’s
hands came together about a foot from her face with a booming explosion of air and sound that
rocked her back on her heels, leaving her open for a meaty paw to grab her armored forearm, whip
her around, and slam her into the tiled floor of the ballroom so hard the tiles shattered and the
concrete beneath crumbled into a three-foot deep crater.

“You think you can beat me!” Cardin screamed as he rained blows down on her. “I'm the
Juggernaut, b—“ A gold-armored hand emerged from the cloud of concrete dust to bat his
incoming punch aside. Then the crater lit up with flames as a red-eyed Yang rose like an vengeful
demon, her blonde mane aflame with her active semblance.

“And I am Yang-” She threw and uppercut while leaping up at him, connecting with his jaw and
sending him airborne. “Xiao-” She hit the ground and fired both gauntlets downward and behind
her, launching her up into him. “Long,” punch after shotgun blast augmented punch slammed into
Cardin’s chest and midsection driving him backward through the air. “BITCH!” She planted on
foot, reared back and let fly a crashing blow with her right hand that sent Cardin flying through the
wall of the ballroom, through the connecting hall, and into the parking garage beyond.

Grinning a ferocious grin, she cracked her knuckles. “And don't you forget it.”

“That... was not how he was in school.” Ruby had to raise her voice to be heard over all the ball
attendees screaming and fleeing for the exits.

“Indeed.” Pyrrha said, having finally collected herself. “He always had raw power, but nothing like
this. He took almost a quarter of my aura without even trying—through my shield.”

Jaune frowned, both out of concern for her and because things he'd seen hadn't added up. “He really
didn't hit you that hard—or directly.” The engineer in him was telling him none o it looked right,
but he couldn't put his finger on why.

“Wouldn't this be a good time to put on you other fancy outfits?” Ruby asked as everyone heard
Cardin shouting and the smashing of metal and glass through the hole Yang punched him through.

He shook his head. “I never even thought of the possibility we might need to get out armor in an
emergency. A remote protocol is a good idea, but... not something I can set up from here with my
scroll.”

“Then you should leave.” Pyrrha said, readying her shield again. “He seems to be fixated on you.
Maybe if you aren't in the area, he'll calm down and we can deal with him in the traditional
manner.”

“I can't just leave you!”

Ruby gave him a pointed look. “Jaune. Remember who you're talking to. Fighting giant monsters:
kind of in her wheelhouse. You... you're kind of a trainee.”

Any other arguments were tabled when a catering van crashed through the same wall Yang had put
Cardin through, heading straight for Yang.

It didn't even make it halfway before being batted out of the air and smashed into a ruin of metal and fiberglass by an over-sized hammer. Ren's partner—Jaune recalled him calling her Nora—leapt atop the wreck with a savage grin, calling back over her shoulder at Yang. "No hogging the fight! It's my turn!"

With that, she shifted the hammer to grenade launcher mode and dropped to a kneeling position, taking careful aim at the hole as the barging steps of Cardin's return drew closer. The second he crashed back through the hole, she opened up on him, sending heart-painted grenades into his center of mass at the same time Ren started peppering him with automatic fire from his guns.

Neither even slowed his advance, but they did distract him from the thick rime of ice forming on the floor, emanating from Weiss's Myrtlenaster, which the Schnee heiress had plunged into the tiles. He made it two steps before slipping and falling to the frozen floor. The impact cracked the ground.

"Go?" Ruby asked Pyrrha.

"Go." Both women dashed across the largely empty floor, charging the downed foe from different angles to hit him hard before he could regain his footing.

Left alone, Jaune gripped his heirloom blade as he surveyed the battle. Both Ruby and Pyrrha were right: he wasn't ready to fight anything stronger than an asthmatic juvenile Beowolf outside the armor. But he still had his mind, and it was telling him something strange was going on with Cardin/The Juggernaut and it wasn't just a mental issue.

The first issue: did he really weight enough to crack the floor by falling over?

Before him, the fight was unfolding.

Nora had leapt off the remains of the van to bring her hammer down on Cardin's back, unloading a grenade round on impact. The recoil actually launched her into the ceiling where she slammed into a chandelier and got tangled in the wires. Ruby and Pyrrha hit him next, hacking at him with their weapons to no avail until he rose to his knees and clapped again, sending them tumbling.

Ren poured on the more ammo while Weiss launched a trio of fireballs that only managed to knock Cardin down for a second before he rose again. By that point, Yang was back in the fray, trying to recreate her earlier display, but Cardin was smart enough to shy away from any more uppercuts. He finally slapped her away, sending her crashing into the mangled corpse of the catering van.

Then Weiss switched chambers in Myrtlenaster's revolver core and shot forward atop a glyph. Cardin didn't see her coming, and before he noticed, she'd stabbed him in the right bicep, encasing it in ice up to the shoulder and down past the elbow.

Roaring wordlessly, he turned to swat at her... only to find himself unable to extend his frozen arm. He goggled in frustration as Weiss retreated only to be replaced by Ruby, who saw his imprisoned arm as the opening it was and delivered a series of high-speed sashes to his ribs. When she backed off, Pyrrha closed from the other side, trying to drive Milo into the hollow under his arm while he was distracted.

At the same time, there was a series of pops, and a bright flash as Nora tore herself free of the chandelier, completely ignoring the shocks she got, and dove, hammer at the ready. She hit Cardin in the right shoulder with a deafening impact that made the ice around it explode while the
pulverized floor at his feet also broke apart even further.

It was only then that Jaune realized what had been bothering him. Even given the presence of aura and semblance, physics was still a thing. For every action there was an equal and opposite reaction. Except for when it came to the Juggernaut. When he hit someone, there was no rebounding motion of his fist, he just sent them flying even with a glancing blow. When something hit him, it wasn't just like they'd hit something indestructible, it was like they were taking an inordinate amount of damage in return—or the floor under his feet took it instead.

And yet, even with all his supposed strength, Cardin had been unable to break free of Weiss's ice by simply flexing with his herculean power.

Suddenly, it all made sense. He gripped the hilt of his sword in triumph and reached for his earbud.

“Ruby?”

“Little busy here!”

“Kind of the point. Listen, if I give you instructions for Weiss, can you relay them to her?”

“Done and done!”

“Great. Pyrrha, Yang: listen up: I've got a plan to stop the unstoppable.”

Chapter End Notes

If I hadn't made the joke, the reviews would have been full of the same one.

Yeah, I'm taking some liberties with how Juggernaut works for the purposes of the fic, but I think it makes the fight more fun. Plus, I have a character in the Descendants named Bad Lass who takes this concept to the limit in that she can consciously direct kinetic energy like this.

Speaking of other fiction, you might want to check out my site, DescendantsSerialDOTcom this Wednesday, as I'll be debuting the story I mentioned earlier that started as an attempt to cross RWBY over with my original property Ere setting.

Also, I have this other idea for a fic: a Power Rangers fusion. Ozpin as Zordon, Salem as Rita... I'm sure I could knock out a few chapters of that to amuse myself if people want to hear it.
“For the record, I think this is a bad plan,” Yang put her two cents in while falling back to reload the Ember Celica.

“I've gotta agree... I'm seeing a lot of ways this could make you dead,” added Ruby, “Also, Weiss called you a buffoon, but if—and I quote--'he's willing to carry out this suicidal plan, then I'll suppose it's my duty to try and make it slightly less suicidal.'” She'd given up trying to do any damage at all with Crescent Rose and was doing her best to harry Cardin with her speed.

Jaune grumbled over the comm as he crouched behind and overturned table, looking up the closest route to the Vale River from the hotel. “Wanna add on to the pile of support I'm getting, Pyrrha?”

“While I will say I wish we had a different plan, I don't see any alternative: our weapons aren't doing anything to Cardin and he doesn't seem to be tiring.” She'd already disengaged from the battle and fallen back to carry out her part of the plan.

“That... was sort of supportive,” admitted Jaune, finalizing his route. “And just in case anyone doubts me, this is the best option we've got. And believe me, I'm not happy about it. Thing is, however he manages it, this guy can redirect kinetic energy. That means nothing we do to him is going to injure him. As long as he can move, he's unstoppable.”

“But if we can keep him from moving in the first place...” Pyrrha caught on.

Jaune nodded even though she couldn't see him. “Right. So we're in luck in the fact that we have a Dust specialist here that can freeze him. And kind of screwed by the fact that the river is three miles from here. This is going to be a hell of a run.” He may not have gotten fat thanks to his lifestyle, but his stamina wasn't much to write home about. He was praying his newly unlocked Aura would help there.

“If we're seriously doing this, I've gotta go get something out of the limo. I'll meet you guys at the river!” Yang said before cutting out of the fight entirely and making a run toward the gaping hole in the wall that coincidentally led to the garage.

Not having been privy to Yang's reasoning over the comms, Weiss was understandably put off by seeing her break off the assault. “Where are you going, Yang?! Get back here: we're in the middle of a fight!” She was immediately reminded of that fact as Cardin lunged for her, missing only by the grace of he pulling herself back with a glyph.

“No sense wasting any more time,” Said Jaune, taking one last look at his scroll where he'd set up a connection back tot he Arc Compound and Glynda. “Glynda, please give me turn-by turn directions to the river. Oh, and keep the streets clear.”

One of his first successful hacks had been the traffic light control center for the city. It was one of the reasons he was still alive despite driving like he did. He closed his scroll as soon as he got a confirmation the Glynda was doing her job.

Getting into a sprint's stance, then realizing he wasn't nearly coordinated enough to start running from said stance, Jaune got back up only to have a thought occur to him. “Hey Pyr?”
“Yes, Jaune?”

“I just realized we didn't even get to have one dance. I guess there was something to Yang's thing about superhero lifestyles after all. I promise I'll make up to you... you know, if I'm alive after that.”

“I would like that. And you have better survive this, Jaune Arc. Mistral has very specific mythos about heroes who have infiltrated the afterlife. I will find you.”

“Cool, like a reverse haunting! And I would totally help her, Jaune, so don't screw up!” Ruby chimed in.

Jaune rolled his eyes. Such supportive women in his life. “Alright chums, let's do this. Everyone else back off so Pyrrha can get his attention.”

The signal was relayed to those without earbuds by hand signals for Ruby and it went surprisingly well. Evidently the petite speedster had even let the two SHIELD agents in on the plan, as Ren and Nora ceased fire as Pyrrha knelt, couched Milo in its carbine form into the notch in Akouo, and fired off three rounds rapid into the side of Cardin's head.

Jaune waited for the giant to turn and face her to take off from where he'd been waiting behind her. The object being to make it look like Pyrrha was trying to cover his escape. It took him a few clumsy moment to get up to speed; dress shoes and suit pants weren't the best running gear; but he was soon under way and pelting full tilt for the door he knew would lead to the patio overlooking the main street.

All that stood in his way were the glass double doors. Which someone had closed.

Panic struck him. He could have sworn he'd seen the doors open earlier. Someone must have slammed them closed when the crowd fled as if some flimsy wood and glass could stop The Juggernaut. Unfortunately, it could stop Jaune, if only for a few crucial seconds while he pulled them open and Cardin caught up.

Someone else must have had the same thought before a black streak shot past him and the next thing he knew, the patio doors had been blown into a cloud of tinkling glass, charred wood and pink smoke. It didn't take a genius to guess who was responsible for that. He didn't know exactly what their agency wanted from him, but he was starting to like the SHIELD agents.

Holding his breath so he didn't choke on the pink smoke, he trampled the glass remains of the doors underfoot and vaulted the waist-high wrought iron fence surrounding the patio, landing on the sidewalk outside the hotel. Taking Glynda's directions, he turned to his left and struck off down the street, running for all he was worth.

Behind him, the entire glass facade separating the patio from the ballroom exploded outward as Cardin barged through it. The giant lost time looking up and down the street before finally getting Jaune in his sights. “You can run all you want, Arc!” He bellowed to the heavens. “But no matter where you go, no matter what you try—you can't stop me! Nothing can stop me!”

With that, Cardin lit out in pursuit, every step cracking the pavement and shaking the ground. Thanks to whatever new power he'd obtained, he could transfer the kinetic energy in every step straight back into the ground, making ever loping step propel him twice as far as normal.

Jaune refused to let himself look back. That would only slow him down and possibly make him fill his pants in terror. What he did catch, out of the corner of his eye, were the occasional flashed of
red rose petals, white glyph-light or pink explosions. His friends and allies were racing ahead of him, roof-topping to avoid all the obstacles he was going to have to skirt on the ground.

A hard right turn took him into a narrow alley between a mini-mart and a shoe store. He hoped the confined space would force Cardin to go around, but a rumble and a crash behind him told him he had no such luck.

“Damn it. Glynda, recalculate to bypass any through ways not large enough for him to pass through. We're doing enough damage without me leading him through places where he'll collapse buildings.”

“The new route will add point three miles to the route.”

Jaune's leg muscles were burning, as were his lungs. He was afraid to ask how much further he still had to go even without the adjustment, but he wasn't going to be the idiot that trained a superpowered psychopath through a populated area. “Just tell me where to turn.”

She did, sending him down backstreets with enough twists and turns to keep Cardin from hitting his ground-devouring stride until finally he spotted the masts an cranes denoting the riverside docks.

Vale sat on a delta where the river met the sea. Most of the docks and accompanying infrastructure were situated on the waterfront as there were few settlements upriver. Jaune had ruled out leading Cardin to them because they were operational twenty-four hours a day and also he couldn't be certain Weiss could freeze sea water. The riverside docks, however closed at nine, meaning only himself and some very unlucky night watchmen would be around.

He made the last turn, his body screaming at him that there would be hell to pay later (at least until his Aura repaired all the lactic acid build-up and muscle strain), and saw the main entrance to the dockyard looming up in front of him.

The steel gate had been ripped open, lying in a mangled heap to the side. It wasn't hard to guess who was responsible for that.

Unfortunately, it was just at that moment that Cardin managed to try something creative with his incredible powers: he jumped.

'Jumped' being the proper term only because he didn't sustain enough hang-time for it to be called flight. But he did clear thirty yards, easily clearing Jaune's head, and landed with a thunderous boom on the asphalt of the dockyard, creating an instant five-foot deep crater.

Jaune skidded to a stop just at the edge of said crater, eyes wide with shock as he watched the big man turn and set eyes on him. Beyond, tauntingly close, he could see the pier stretching out into the river. So close, but a Juggernaut away.

“Going somewhere, Jauney Boy?” Cardin cracked his titanic knuckles.

Left with nothing else to try, Jaune drew Crocea Mors and expanded the shield, slipping into a sloppy battle stance as he tried to edge his way around the crater. “Let me ask you something, Mr. Winchester: what do you get out of killing me? I'm perfectly willing to pay you; find you a new job —Dust, think about all the good you could do with all that power especially if you really took the time to learn how to work it! We shouldn't be fighting, we should be working together!”

For a moment, it looked like he was getting through to the giant. Cardin gave him a curious look. “Y-you're serious, aren't you?”
“Completely. Look, I never meant for you to get hurt. What do you say, buddy?”

“I say...” Cardin started, but the whispers started again, accompanied by more visions of the Gem. In his mind's eye, he could make out the shadow of something vast within it: a hulking humanoid shape with a domed helmet. “That it's too bad that you never meant for me to get hurt, because I mean it completely!”

He thrust his fingers into the broken ground beneath Jaune's feet and heaved, cracking off a shelf of the stuff with Jaune on top and hurling it skyward. All his prey could do was scream as he and a tumbling slab of asphalt and concrete rapidly ascended.

The Arc family shield was suddenly rimed in a familiar black energy signature and tucked in close to Jaune's chest, pulling him backward, out of the way just as a blur of laughing pinkness shot past him. Was Nora flying? By spinning her hammer overhead?

Jaune's confusion was ended when the laughing woman twisted in midair, brought up her hammer, and shattered the slab into a cloud of debris that rained down on Cardin. He didn't have time to appreciate it before his magnetically levitating shield deposited him further inside the dockyard, away from Cardin and the renewed fray.

He looked back and saw that the pier was right there. Turning, he prepared to yell at Cardin, to get him moving again, when he caught sight of a flash of blonde hair.

“Hey Cardin!” Yang had her belt on, more than likely invoking the 'three strikes' clause from Coco should she ever find out. She thrust her elbows back, causing the Ember Celica to cock dramatically (while expelling a pair of perfectly good shotgun shells because Yang cared way more about the drama of the thing). “Round Two!”

Cardin growled, wiping dust and grit form his eyes. “Don't you get it!? Hit me as much as you want, Xiao Long, you can't win. I'm raw power!”

“Nope.” Yang replied, popping the 'p'. “You're the same thing you always were: an arrogant bully who thinks he can hit things until he gets what he wants. Only this time? The thing you tried to hit was one of my friends. So now I've gotta step in,” She reached down and took hold of the dial on the belt, clicking it three levels clockwise. Blue and orange particles expanded in a wave from ever surface of the belt to cover her body until all anyone could see of her was a Yang-shaped blob. Then the blob expanded to twice Yang's size and the particles dispersed into blue and orange tendrils of smoke rising from a super-sized Yang, “… and see how you do picking on someone your own size!”

“Oh my...” Pyrrha breathed.

“Sweet Dust, is that what that thing you found does?!” Jaune added.

“Oh hush, that was awesome.” Yang motioned for Cardin to come at her and she wasn't disappointed. The Juggernaut exploded from his crater, leading with a powerful haymaker that she easily dodged, replying with a pair of jumbo blasts to his gut from Ember Celica. Then she clapped his ears. Unstoppable or not, the sudden change of pressure in his inner ear disoriented Cardin, and when he went for his next swing, Yang caught his arm and hauled hard, throwing him over his hip. Her aim was to wing him into the river, but she had never had the best long-range aim in the first
place and on top of that, she wasn't used to fighting at huge size, so instead, she launched him into a stack of cargo containers, which toppled over on top of him in a cacophony of clangs.

“Eh, I meant to do that.”

“How do you call yourself a Huntress if you can't even aim properly, you gigantic oaf!” Weiss had recovered quickly from the prospect of a giant Yang and was responding to something she couldn't compartmentalize in the only way she knew how.

Yang blew a kiss in her direction. “Love you too, Weiss Cream!”

“I hate to interrupted this little moment,” Ren called out, “But I hardly believe that stopped him. We need to be on our—“ The pile of fallen containers exploded outward, flying in all directions, creating a deadly rain of twisted metal as Cardin hurled them off him in mass.

Black glows started appearing over them, flaring into existence just long enough to knock them into trajectories that took them away from the assembled Hunters (and Jaune) or knock them into one another to do that same. Pyrrha had to step fully into the open to keep them all in sight as she waved her hands in frantic but precise motions, literally orchestrating her friends' salvation.

Somehow, through all the flying metal and debris, Cardin spotted her. With a grunt and a bellow, he leapt, easily covering the distance while clenching both hands over his head for a powerful overhand strike.

Ruby launched into Pyrrha's midsection with enough speed to double the champion over and knock the air form her. They cannoned out of the way while at the same time, a trio of Schnee glyphs formed ahead of Cardin. These, however, were not deceleration glyphs. Quite the opposite.

Accelerated to almost the speed of sound, Cardin struck the ground and tore into it like a meteor falling to Remnant, digging a deep divot through asphalt, concrete and the dirt beneath. That divot was soon filled with pink grenades, blasts from the now-huge Ember Celica, and rapid-fire Dust rounds from Ren's Stormflower.

Despite absorbing more firepower than a Goliath, Cardin still managed to extract himself from the hole in no time, muscles contorting and straining under his mounting fury. He emerged, covered in dirt and soot, staring down Yang, Nora and Ren, trying to decide which of them needed to die first.

Then someone whistled off to his right.

“Hey! Did you forget me or something?”

Jaune. Arc.

Cardin's eyes narrowed. It was time to make that man die once and for all. Ignoring the other three, The Juggernaut started toward Jaune, pace quickening with ever step. Once more, he brought both hands up, clasping them together, ready to use them to reduce Jaune to a sticky mess and a bad memory.

Seeing him coming, Jaune started to back up, preparing himself to run the final few steps... only for his shoe to skid on a pebble and send him tripping to the ground. He couldn't even think up an appropriate curse to be his last word as he looked up, finding Cardin barreling down on him. All he could do was raise his shield and pray his Aura let him survive with only every other bone in his body converted to a high-calcium custard.

He felt the impact. The Arc Family Shield shook, sending pain shooting up his arm. Then he heard
what sounded like an explosion—only it wasn't happening to him. When a second passed and he wasn't dead, he dared to hope that maybe Nora or Yang had managed to divert the blow.

When he lowered his shield, he discovered not so much the source of his salvation, but a mystery.

Cardin was getting to his feet some ten feet from him—at the bottom of an oddly-shaped crater as deep as Jaune was tall. The ground had been blown apart in a bizarre V pattern, the point of said V starting just a few inches in front of him and extending out about twenty feet in a sweeping arc before him.

How on Remnant had that happened? He decided to table that for a later day because whatever it was hadn't put Cardin down for keeps. Scrambling to his feet, Jaune started backing away more carefully. To his infinite relief, his feet hit the wooden planks of the pier by the time Cardin had gotten his bearings.

“Okay, just like we planned.” He said, trying to sound calm over the comms.

“How the heck did he miss you?” Ruby asked, making Jaune realize that the other hadn't seen what happened thanks to Cardin's bulk being in the way.

He decided on the truth, “I... have no idea. Are you guys ready, because I don't think that's going to happen twice.”

Ruby chuckled nervously. “Ready here. So is Weiss.”

“Ready on my end with the green guy and grenade girl.” Yang added.

“I'm ready as well. Good luck.” Pyrrha said.

Jaune was pretty sure he'd used all that up over the past month, but kept his mouth shut as he watch Cardin focus in on him again. The big man let out a growl as he dragged himself out of the newest crater and stomped toward him. He moved cautiously as well this time. There had been too many surprised and blindsides for his liking.

Slowly, but surely, Jaune backed past the midpoint of the pier, making certain that Cardin was standing over deep water before stopping.

“L-last chance, Cardin.” Jaune said, suddenly realizing that his plan required an astounding amount of good timing. “We can stop right now and sit down, talk about this like adults. Maybe get something to eat? I mean I'm starving after all this: I bet you are too. There's a pretty awesome shwarma place down the street, we could...”

“Don't you ever SHUT UP?!” Cardin bellowed.

“Well, I tried.” Jaune shrugged, collapsing his shield and sheathing Crocea Mors. “Ladies, take it away.”

Cardin looked behind him on reflex.

He wasn't looking in the right direction. Jaune was watching to either side. On the right, he saw Ruby, Crescent Rose fully extended as she ran at her maximum speed—on the water. Her deadly blade flashed as she slashed it through pylon after pylon, systematically destroying the supports on the right side of the pier. On the left, he saw a whirling disc of black and red and bronze: Milo suspend by Pyrrha's semblance and being rotated at high speed around its own hilt to transform it into a buzzsaw that was doing the same job as Ruby.
In the morning, he was going to have to write a very large check to the owner of the dockyard. But tonight...

Behind him, he heard the thunk as Ruby used Crescent Rose to swing up onto the pier even as the ruined pylons started to give and the wooden planks groaned under their own shifting weight. Jaune gave Cardin a cocky little salute before extending his arm outward.

He was glad that looked badass, because in the next moment, Ruby grabbed said arm while running at easily fifty miles an hour, damn near dislocating his shoulder. At least that's the reason he gave later for the girlish scream he let out.

They reached solid ground as the pier was still collapsing, Cardin had just enough time to turn around before he and the pier hit the water in a colossal splash.

Jaune held his breath as he watched Weiss spring gracefully to the edge of the water and plunge her rapier into it, releasing her entire charge of ice Dust. Just as he'd prayed, the sub-zero temperatures propagated quickly, transforming a forty foots section of the river into a solid block, including the water still mid-air from the splash. Cardin was caught in mid-fall, the water surrounding him locking everything but his head into place, unable to move.

“‘Yes!” Jaune shouted, unable to control his relief, his pride, or his excitement at having stopped the supposedly unstoppable (never mind that it was actually Weiss who did that part). He threw his arms in the air in celebration only to realize too late that the only thing holding his poor, abused body up had been Ruby.

As he started to crumple to the ground, a pair of strong, slim arms wrapped around him, not quite catching him, but lowering him gently to the ground. He found himself kneeling beside Pyrrha in a warm embrace. She squeezed him tightly, her head resting on his shoulder. “I'm not even going to count how many times you almost died just now.” She said, clearly fighting to keep her tone light, “When we get home, we're going to have a discussion about plans and how we're not going to make any more clearly suicidal ones.”

The clop of a pair of stylish (and now soaked) wedge boots came from the direction of the river. “So here's a silly question: What exactly do we plan to do with that hooligan now that we've capture him?”

“Don’t worry, I’ve already taken care of that.” Lie Ren arrived with Yang and Nora following close behind. In the distance, there was the familiar roar of Bullhead engines; at least three of them. Ren stepped into Jaune's field of vision. “Mr. Arc, I'm afraid that this time I have to insist on that meeting immediately. All of you need to be debriefed ASAP.”

Weiss drew herself up, immediately taking charge of the situation. “I how then, that you'll be explaining to us exactly what on Remnant just happened here.” She gestured back at the trapped Juggernaut, “That is not the result of a semblance, technology or any Dust I've ever heard of and I am a Dust specialist.”

Ren gave her an impassive look. “I can explain that to you right now, but the debrief will make it easier to take, I can promise you that right now.”

“Try me.”

“Alright. That, Ms. Schnee, is the result of magic.”
Everyone expected Yang to the the Hulk. I get why, but I like writing Yang a bit smarter than just a bruiser and while Green Scar was pretty quippy, Yang is a very banter-ful character. Thus, I gave her the Gi/Ant-man/Wasp powers with a Remnant-based excuse.

I love that Remnant is totally just a setting for 4e D&D, Points of Light and all. I kind of want to run a D&D or Pathfinder game set in Remnant now. Pm if you want in, we'll see if this can happen.

Speaking of which, the first chapter of my original sotry that was originally plotted as a RWBY-meets-dungeonpunk fantasy fanfic, The Dragonwright Chronicles is up on my site. Unfortunately, FF now blocks website URLs even in my profile (people have been telling me it's broken, but sadly, I can't fix it), so you'll have to go to descendantsserial DOT com to check it out. Let me know what you think!

So in most comic appearances, Juggernaut is stopped by either throwing him very far away, sealing him in the Earth, or using mental powers after removing his helmet. In X-men Evolution, they managed to just seal him in a block of ice. Given this is Cinder we're dealing with, I'm pretty sure it's obvious why I went with that option.

The Ball Arc is almost done. The gang will soon learn the true purpose of the Remnant version of SHIELD and what they want with Jaune. It's going to be fun!
“Of all the insipid, unbelievable excuses! Magic. Magic!” Weiss had been complaining so long she was looping herself, gesticulating wildly in her irritation such that she almost knocked herself off her seat in the troop compartment of the SHIELD bullhead.

While helmeted in visored agents set to work cutting the block of ice containing Cardin Winchester out of the Vale River, Ren had herded them into one of the three bullheads that had responded to his call. He hadn't exactly walked them in at gunpoint, but he brooked no arguments over who was and wasn't going. Even when Weiss threatened to tell her father, Ren had calmly replied that even Wilhelm Schnee held no power of SHIELD.

They'd been in the air for a half hour, which was forty-five minutes too long for Jaune and his fragile gut. He sat doubled over a trashcan, glad that he hadn't had time to load up on appetizers at the ball. Pyrrha was beside him, rubbing gentle circles across his back. It helped, but he really, really wanted a drink after all that had happened.

“What's wrong with magic?” Nora was sitting on the other side of Yang and Ruby from Weiss, giving the heiress a curious look that would have bordered on offended if that concept didn't seem foreign to Nora.

Even the fact that Ren had disappeared into another compartment hadn't stopped Weiss complaining, but Nora's question brought her up short as she stopped to study the young woman. Incredulity was written all over her face and as the seconds ticked by, a twitch started to form above her eye, right where the faint scar crossed her brow.

“W-what's wrong with magic?! What's wrong with magic?! In the context of explaining a raving madman with powers beyond anything we've seen before? Oh where oh where do I start?” She mimed mulling the question over, putting a finger to her lips before widening her eyes in mock inspiration. “Oh, I know—BECAUSE IT DOESN'T EXIST, YOU BLISTERING IDIOT!”

Much to her irritation, Nora was not cowed by her outburst. Much to the contrary, she scoffed. “You don't believe in magic and I'm the idiot? Pfft. You're looking at magic!” She drew out Magnhild in its grenade launcher form, immediately shifting it to hammer mode and dropping the head past a suddenly alarmed Yang and Ruby to land with a resounding clang right between Weiss's feet. “There. Magnhild was made for me by dwarves—bet you've never seen anything like it here on Midgard.”

Weiss narrowed her eyes at 'dwarves' and sent a glare that could have etched steel at the word 'Midgard', but she decided to humor Nora and went to pick the weapon up for examination. A minute later, straining and huffing, she finally managed to haul the hammer up into the empty bench on her other side with Ruby's help while Yang sat by, smirking.

She did her best to compose herself and act as if that hadn't been an arduous chore (as well as proof of something at work, seeing as Nora swung the hammer on her own with impunity while barely being more muscular than Ruby).

Leaning down to look it over, she gave a haughty sniff. “This is merely your average, every day custom mecha-shift weapon. Any student of any preliminary combat academy builds at least one
such weapon over the course of their studies. It's as common as aura-unlocking trials—more so, actually since it isn't uncommon for hunters in training to change weapons several times before moving on to finishing Academies such as Haven, Shade or Beacon. This is technology, not magic.”

Nora hopped up from her seat and zipped over to where Weiss stood, leaning over her shoulder and violating her personal space in a Ruby-esque manner—which was made all the more evident because Ruby was doing the same over Weiss's other shoulder. “But what's it made of, huh?”

Weiss rolled her eyes and took a closer look. Magnhild's exterior looked, at first glance, to be made of standard gunmetal, but upon closer inspection, Weiss could see a gold-bronze sheen to the metal, which at certain angles shifted to a glossy, mother-of-pearl appearance. She'd never seen a material like it.

“I...”

Nora grinned cheekily. “You've never seen it before. Know why? Because Uru metal is only found on Asgard. The people of Midgard wouldn't even know how to forge it! Uru is harder, stronger and just plain better than every metal on Midgard, especially when dwarves forge their magic into it like they did Magnhild. You know why it's so heavy to you? Magic. Know how it's powered?”

“Dust.” Weiss replied dryly.

“Magic!” Nora corrected, waving her hands excitedly.

Ruby, not used to her partner being so much taller than her, practically had to climb Weiss's shoulder as the heiress straightened out to glare some more at Nora. Resisting Weiss's attempts to shake her off, she gave the weapon her own inspection. “Actually, Weiss, you know what? I don't seen a dust circuit on this thing. Or any way to open it up to get to an internal one.”

“That's because it's magic!” Nora beamed.

This got Ruby thinking, which made Weiss cringe. The red-cloaked young woman dropped down to hug Weiss's arm. “Come on, Weiss! Think of the possibilities: with magic, maybe I could make Crescent Rose's blade like... a molecule wide so she could cut through anything! Or have rounds that can shoot around corners. Oh, or maybe I could fuse her to my arm and have a scythe arm!”

Just as Weiss was about to pop a blood vessel, they all felt the bullhead decelerate and slowly stop. The telltale tremor of making airdock ran through the craft moments before the door to the compartment Ren disappeared into opened.

“The Director will be giving us our debriefing personally,” the dark haired agent informed them as he emerged from the entrance. He had his scroll in hand, and as he spoke, he manipulated the screen, ordering the bullhead's bay doors to open. “Follow me.”

He led them out into an indoor skydock, the gigantic bay doors leading outside sealed. There were few windows and all of them were shuttered with armor plating at the moment, leaving the atmosphere of the entire place to seem suffocating with it harsh, artificial lighting.

Ren led them through a set of double doors and into seemingly endless corridors. None of them sported a single soul except themselves, though on occasion one of them would spot a door closing or hear muffled voices.

They were being isolated from the rest of SHIELD's operations, Jaune surmised. Whatever they were involved in, SHIELD didn't want them to see the rest of the iceberg looming beneath the
surface. That didn’t sit well with him: knowing there were other ‘situations’ like Cardin out there, possibly worse ones that he didn’t know about.

Eventually, they were ushered into a modern-looking board room with a long table and a holographic screen rising up from the center. One entire side of the room was dominated by a floor-to-ceiling window, which itself was covered over by armor plating.

As they took their seats, Pyrrha leaned over to him. “They're trying to hide that we're still somewhere in the city,” she whispered, “We circled almost the entire flight.”

It took a moment for Jaune to figure out how she knew that before it hit him: her semblance was polarity; it made sense that she might be able to sense the magnetic north of the biggest magnet in the world—the world itself. Which brought up an interesting suite of ideas. Inside the bullhead,s he couldn’t see the outside world when she’d already explained that she needed to see things to have an effect on them. Maybe that was a mental block? Or maybe it was just that the world was that damn big she didn’t need to see.

He was shaken out of his musings by the sound of the door opening and a collective gasp from his friends (and Weiss).

“Professor?” Ruby squeaked out.

That got Jaune's head snapping up. His eyes settled on the man who had just entered and, though he’d never met him in person, there was no mistaking who he was: Headmaster Ozpin of Beacon. The man was a living legend. He trained living legends. Half the great heroes of living memory had come under his tutelage at some point.

Including Jaune's father. Heck, his grandfather had reportedly been one of Ozpin's contemporaries back before they even were hunter schools.

Ozpin inclined his head in Ruby's direction and stepped up to the head of the table, setting his mug down carefully. “Actually, Miss Rose, I am not here in the capacity of professor or headmaster. My title here is director of the Strategic Hazard Intervention—”

“SHIELD!” Nora interrupted with a grin, drawing scandalized looks from all the other huntresses present. She looked at them confused, “What?”

For his part, Ozpin chuckled and took a seat, leaning his cane on the side of his chair. “Yes, I suppose that will serve just as well. I do apologize for the interruption in your lives, but there are now several issues we simply no longer have the leisure to ignore. It is little concession, I know, but we will be providing refreshment such as they are. And as proud as I am to see that so many of my former students answered the call to heroism tonight, I am also deeply troubled that another seems to have fallen to the darkness.”

Seeing that none of said former students seemed willing to offer any questions directly to him, Jaune took point. “So... if you don't mind me asking sir... what did happen to make Winchester like that?” Out of the corner of his eye, he could make out Weiss, hands clenched into fists, jaw tense as if she were praying the answer wouldn't be 'magic'.

Ozpin nodded in Jaune's direction. “A fair question, Mr. Arc. Have any of you ever heard the name Cytorrak?”

While he waited for an answer, the door behind him opened and a pair of visored agents came in with a trolley stacked high with wrapped energy bars as long as Jaune's forearm and bottles of a
blue-green liquid. They set two energy bars and three bottles in front of everyone as the meeting continued as if they weren't there. Everyone, including the more reserved Weiss, Pyrrha and Ren started tearing into them like they were starving.

Jaune found himself joining in. Aura wasn't the mystical force it was often described as: the material the body used in miraculous healing and stamina had to come from somewhere and as such those with unlocked auras required incredible amounts of calories after exercising their aura-based abilities.

Weiss raised her hand as if in class, waiting with uncharacteristic patience until Ozpin called on her. “Cytorrak was one of the old gods from ancient Remnant history. I'm... not sure what he has to do with what happened tonight.”

“That would be because we are very careful not to teach much more than his name to the general public.” Ozpin took out a scroll and used it to activate the holoscreen, throwing up the image of a fresco. The ancient, chipped and faded work depicted a city burning around a giant humanoid thing with a domed head as wide as its shoulders and no neck to speak of.

“Cytorrak was a god of chaos, violence and destruction who urged the cultures that worshiped him to kill and conquer. Most infamously were his high priests and mightiest followers who served as vessels of his will. We have found altars on three continents, each with a sconce designed to hold what appears to be a large gem of some sort and the following inscription...”

He called up several new images, each with an altar bearing the same words. 'Whosoever touches this gem shall be granted the power of the Crimson Gem of Cytorrak. Henceforth, you who read these words, shall become forevermore a human juggernaut'.

“Juggernaut... that what he called himself,” said Pyrrha. “I understand that Cardin was never a pleasant person, but I don't believe he would turn to worshiping the kind of monster you're describing, Pro... Director.”

Ozpin nodded. “Indeed. There seems to be no requirement of worship to become the vessel. We have teams tracing Mr. Winchester's steps the past few days to locate the Gem and how he came into contact with it. For now, we are more concerned with keeping the latest Juggernaut contained and unable to bring the destruction Cytorrak desires.”

Weiss had had enough. Ozpin or no Ozpin, she was not happy that they were talking about a mythic figure as if it were real. “But... that's just what Cardin thinks, yes? There's no 'real' god of destruction.”

Her hopes died as Ozpin's expression grew dour. “Whether Cytorrak or any of the other beings who claim godhood are actual gods in the fashion that we understand them is a matter of great discussion,” he gave a brief shake of his head which cause Nora to shockingly clam up, “However, this world we live in is a nexus of sorts where many disparate forces and personalities have crossed paths in the past and will again in the future.”

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table while steepling his fingers before him. “Tell me, all of you: what are your favorite... fairy tales, myths, legends—things of that sort.”

All assembled save Ren and Nora shifted in confusion and lingering discomfort. Weiss, far out on the end of her rope spoke first. “Well the Girl in the Tower was one of my favorites when I was young. But from a standpoint of the more poignant myths, I find myself partial to Silver and the Moon.”
"I also enjoyed The Girl in the Tower," Pyrrha chipped in, "And the Shallow Sea."

Yang made a rude noise. "Lame. Gimme the Thirteen Labors of Cules or the one where the guy cuts the top off a mountain."

Ruby grinned, all too happy with the discussion. "Oh! Oh! The Four Maidens! It was so nice how they made the old wizard's life so much better!"

Jaune wasn't sure, but he thought he saw Ozpin blink an extra time at that. But the topic was so bizarre that it didn't fully register, especially when the SHIELD director turned his attention on him. "And you, Mr. Arc?"

"Um..." he rubbed the back of his head. "The Knight and the Star Dragon? I know it's kind of corny but..."

Ozpin held up a hand. "No, that it an excellent tale, Mr. Arc and I hardly think I would have expected anything less from you." Jaune didn't know whether to take that as an insult or not and he didn't have time to ruminate on it before the other shoe dropped. "The reason I asked is because we've found that many—if not most—modern myths and fairy tales contain some level of truth. They are folk memories, or sometimes garbled warnings from the past about such beings as Cytorrak, passed down for so long that the details have been altered and expanded upon."

"That... can't be true." Weiss wasn't sounding so sure.

"Oh?" Ozpin manipulated his scroll again and the great shutters over the windows ground open, granting the assembled a grand view of the City of Vale and Beacon Academy, both lit up in their finery from high above both. Which, as they all knew was impossible as the Headmaster's Tower at Beacon was the highest civilized point in the region. Only the barren mountain above Beacon was higher and no one could or would live on those sheer slopes.

Besides, they could make out the peak of said mountain, still far below their vantage.

"That's..." Weiss started.

"So pretty." Ruby said, staring at the vista before them.

"Yes, it's pretty, but it's also impossible!" Weiss snarled, "There is nothing above the mountain—you know this because we climbed this stupid thing for your scavenger hunt in second year, remember?"

Ruby thought on this a second, but then gestured out the window. "Yeah, but I'm pretty sure if we're seeing it, it's totally possible. Right Professor?"

That was the prompt Ozpin had been waiting for. "Indeed, Miss Rose. This view you're enjoying is made possible because SHIELD Headquarters is located in an ancient structure: an artificial floating island engineered by means we still do not fully understand to be invisible to everyone but those who already know it's there, atop which sits a tower that was once the prison for a young queen."

"...the Girl in the Tower," Pyrrha finished for him. "This is the island the princesses' lover had to find?"

"Historically, she was, in fact, a Queen and she was rescued by the entire royal guard, none of whom were romantically involved with her, but indeed a royal persona was abducted and held ransom atop an invisible floating island, yes."
Silence fell on everyone as that sunk in. Everyone (but Ruby) still had some doubts, but seeing was believing and they were definitely looking at Vale from an angle they shouldn't be able to without an airship.

Ozpin only gave them a minute before he spoke again. “The problem with the legends is that many of the creatures involved are long-lived, the objects indestructible and the events cyclical. What has come before may come again. The purpose of SHIELD is to stand between the everyday people of this world and the threats posed by such things or by other extraordinary individuals who may become legends in their own right while deploying such people and objects that do not pose a threat for the good of the people.”

“Like me!” Nora sang out, waving Magnhild.

The Director dipped his head in agreement, a slight smile coming to his lips. “Yes. Miss Valkyrie hails from another world known as Asgard where she is known as the Goddess of Thunder.”

Everyone goggled at that, including Ren, which Jaune found interesting. How did he not know something so huge about his partner? As for his own reaction, he wasn't bothered by Nora being a 'god'. Anything with enough power could be considered a 'god'. What bothered him was other tales that might have some truth to them. Many of the fairy stories he'd been brought up with had come from a book his grandfather had grown up with. Those were not the soft and happy stories other kids knew: they were full of blood and doom and the deaths of thousands.

Suddenly the many ruins dotting the landscape made sense.

When the mini-uproar over Nora's identity died down, Ozpin leaned back again and cast an eye in Jaune and Pyrrha's direction. “And that brings me to the two of you: Miss Nikos, Mr. Arc. I had a feeling long ago that both of your paths would lead you to SHIELD, but the events in Vacuo confirmed everything.”

He brought up video on the holoscreen, showing Pyrrha in the Mk 1 armor emerging from the cave holding Jaune. “An impressive device that I'm told it powered by a revolutionary power source.” Both their eyes immediately went to Weiss, who stared back at them. Ozpin quickly moved to defuse the tension. “I'm certain that Miss Schnee understands that everything said here is classified for the good of all Vytal.”

Put on the spot, Weiss straightened her back. “Of course I do,” she sniffed, even though it was clear she didn't really comprehend what she was looking at yet. In fact, she was watching the screen with a troubled look on her face. When Ozpin's attention left her, she leaned over and whispered something to Ruby, whose eyes widened.

Pyrrha turned to Ozpin. “I don't understand. Everything we've done uses technology; nothing approaching magic or anything that might be mistaken for it.”

“A wise man once said the sufficiently advanced technology is often indistinguishable from magic,” countered Ozpin, “And in this case, the designs and means behind your armors are sufficiently advanced. Not Hunter in the modern age is capable of bringing such firepower to bear, something both of you demonstrated handily at Sienna Crossroads.”

Jaune frowned, looking at the video play in a loop on the screen. It showed everything up to the Dust touching off. “So... you know everything already. I might ask how you know this, but right now, I'm wondering why bring us in for questioning if you already know everything?”

Across the table from them, Ruby had passed on whatever Weiss had said to Yang and then had to
physically restrain her sister as the elder sister from Patch started to get up, big mouth locked and loaded. If Ozpin noticed, he gave no indication.

“Because, Mr. Arc, this meeting was never to assess you abilities but your temperament.”

“Then... this is a job interview? You want us to join SHIELD?”

Ozpin chuckled. “I did consider it, but considering your actions so far, you've proven to me that you will act more effectively if left more independent. I have a certain Initiative I wish to embark upon, independent from with with guidance and intel from SHIELD. I want you to lead it and I am willing to transfer Agents Ren and Valkyrie into your command to get it started.” His eyes swept the other Huntresses in attendance, “I believe you have other candidates to join as well.”

Jaune sat back, shocked at the very idea. Him in charge of anything smarter than an AI? There was a reason Cinder basically ran the company and Pyrrha ran everything else. He was not that kind of person, was he? He ran his hands through his hair, trying to sort through what he was being offered.

“Wha—just what would we even be doing?”

“Why exactly what you did tonight: confronting and neutralizing problems beyond the kith and kin of ordinary individuals with the help of equally extraordinary individuals. With SHIELD at least, we give preferential placement to those who are or are at least touched by the extraordinary.”

At this, Nora perked up, an expression of understanding coming over her face. She rounded on Ren. “You do remember! That's why you're here, isn't it? You saw the Rainbow Bridge!”

Shock painted the expression of the otherwise collected agent, caught in the middle of taking a sip of the SHIELD-issue energy drink. He managed to swallow before having his outburst. “What?!”

Nora was far too happy to notice his distress. “The Rainbow Bridge! You know, it's this big glowy —“

“I know what it is!” Ren shouted, cutting her off and sending her recoiling in hurt surprise, “How did you know what it was or that I saw it?”

His gaze had already swung to Ozpin, but Nora was quick to try to explain herself. “Because you had to have seen it that night, Ren! When Heimdall—“

“You knew.” Ren's voice was low and cold as he addressed Ozpin. “How long did you know? Has it really been since I was close to losing my mind and killing myself with over-exertion at Beacon?! Since I threw myself into certain doom for your Agency?! Was it all to keep me pushing myself, trying to avenge someone you knew was alive the whole damn time?!”

Ozpin remained completely impassive, as if such abuse was routine for him. “My initial encounter with Miss Valkyrie was the Agency's first with the people of the Asgard. I was certain that your story described an event under the purview of SHIELD, but I did not know enough to offer you any hope that the person you lost was alive.”

“Then why didn't you tell me that when you sent me to meet her?” Ren still refused to look Nora's way.

“I told you to ask her about herself, to get to know her, secure in the fact that Miss Valkyrie would offer such information eagerly—though I did warn her that you might not remember, to let you come to that conclusion on your own. It is not my fault that you didn't try.”
Ren's jaw tightened and a shadow passed over his eyes as it dawned on him that despite all of Ozpin's crypticness and manipulation, it really was his fault he hadn't bothered to really talk to Nora. He scrubbed the heel of a palm over one eye. “I... If I could be dismissed for a few moments, Director.”

“Granted, Agent Ren. And for my part, I am sorry.”

Moving with swiftness, Ren left to room. Nora looked after him, completely unsure of what to do.

The uncomfortable moment was broken up by Yang finally fighting free of the full nelson Ruby had her in to keep her mouth shut. “If he gets to shout at the old man, so do I!” she announced, shaking Ruby off. Ozpin raised an eyebrow at being called 'old man', but didn't argue.

Yang leveled an accusatory finger at the Director. “Alright! Out with it: how did you get that footage?”

“I beg your pardon?”

Jaune sat up more straight. “That's a good question: we saw that the Dust more or less blew the side off that mountain. That camera was well within the chunky salsa zone of the explosion.”

“That's right.” Yang folded her arms. “Ice Queen said the Schnee subsidiary that did the cleanup found nothing but ash and molten metal within thirty feet of the Dust container and the camera is almost right next to it. So how did you get that footage?” She posed dramatically and waited for a response.

When Ozpin merely sat and waited for her to go on, she deflated half a moment before, “I'll tell you how: you had someone on site whose whole sh*tick is escaping death. And as it turns out, Jaune and Pyrrha both saw someone there we know can do just that.”

She leaned forward, slamming her hands on the table. “So, Prof: where is Blake?”

Chapter End Notes

Sadly, I had to split this chapter in two. All sort of resolutions going on here and they deserve more time. So next chapter, we have Rena and Nora's 'reunion', Blake's return, and Jaune's decision concerning the Initiative.

Sorry if there was just a lot of exposition here, but it had to be done to set up the back half of this fic. Yes, we are at the halfway mark for this, but worry not because I'm already dreaming up a sequel called Arc Reaction: A Noose of Glass to put stuff that didn't make it here like my version of the Black Suit Saga and a lot of villains. There might also be a separate set of side stories set in this universe, I don't know yet.

Someone asked me via PM what I'm going to do with Emerald and Mercury and I did have plans, but the odd thing is that with the rings and supervillains instead of Maiden powers (you'll notice that AR!Cinder doesn't have them even though the Maidens exist —I'll explain that eventually), she doesn't need them. The Influence Ring literally takes Emerald's job. So I'm not sure what to do with them until the sequel. I suppose Cinder would just kill them, but as much as I would love to kill Mercury painfully, there's still things I can do with these characters, only much later.
Speaking of under-used characters, I hope the Weiss-fans don't mind her being extra... Ice Queen here. I imagine as the one who knows Dust best and thus has more idiots around her thinking that's magic, this would be a berserk button for her. I tried to soften that with her being the one to figure out it was Blake that took the footage at the camp.

And now she knows about the armors. Will she defrost or will she be the Token Evil Teammate? Place your bets!

Addressing some questions multiple people have asked: I won't be doing phase 3 characters, so no Dr. Strange, no Black Panther, etc. Also no mutants even though X-men (specifically Academy X) is my favorite franchise from Marvel. Also, no one is going to specifically be Cap because everyone has just enough Cap-traits on their own to come together in Capliness.

And no Civil War. I haven't seen the movie yet, but the comic was such a pile of wet garbage that between it and Decimation I created an entire superhero series to wash the taste of it out of my mouth and nine years in, I'm still angry over it.

Also yes, the AR!Hellicarrier is a magical, floating castle. Because science fantasy.
Of all the things he felt watching the scene of Yang Xiao Long facing down Ozpin, Jaune shocked himself a little to find that the most prominent was envy; envy at Ozpin's ability to be utterly unflappable no matter what happened. There was no way the man could have anticipated the former Team RWBY members deducing that the footage he'd shown must have been shot by their missing member.

And yet there the man was, sitting there calmly with a faint smile on his face like he was watching a child discover one and one equaled two despite Yang looking like she was a hair's breath from feeding him the Ember Celica if he didn't provide a satisfactory answer.

"Actually, I was hoping to address this issue at the end of our meeting, Miss Xiao Long. "I know that it has been years since you had contact with your partner, and I assure you there is a good reason for it."

Jaune glanced to his side and caught Pyrrha staring at the table with a conflicted expression. He imagined he might have looked the same way considering their recent history with this Blake woman if not for the fact that he was restraining himself from calling bullshit on Ozpin trying to play the situation off as if he'd known it would come up.

"It better be a better excuse then just working for this place."

"And no, 'she was deep cover with the White Fang' isn't good enough either, 'cause we already figured that part out."

Ozpin still refused to flinch or look uncomfortable. "That is part of it. However the reality of the situation is that Miss Belladonna withheld certain information about her relationship with Adam Taurus before her insertion. We were led to believe that they had been lovers and partners, but the truth was that Taurus was manipulative, violent and abusive. It soon became obvious that simple extraction would have resulted in deadly retribution... against those humans he believed to be responsible for her 'lapse in judgment' when she left him before."

"You mean us?" Ruby asked.

The older man nodded. "Yes. You and Miss Xiao Long may not have noticed, not having been active targets of the White Fang before, but you Miss Schnee must have surely noticed a dramatic decrease in their attacks on events and venues where you were involved. Miss Belladonna ensured to provide a wide aegis of protection for all of you until such time as she could arrange an exit Taurus couldn't blame on you."

"A spectacular faked death that wouldn't have left a body," Jaune offered. "What was her plan if we didn't blow up the base?"

"According to her reports? She had charges set in the stockpile to frame you for blowing it up regardless."

His little exchange with Ozpin had gone unnoticed by Ruby, yang and Weiss.

"She was protecting us? All this time?" Ruby asked in quiet awe.
Weiss shared her reverence. “Even after how I treated her when we last saw each other. I can't begin to imagine how I can replay that.”

Yang, however, had completely switched gears, moving between the two and throwing an arm around each of their necks. “Oh please, don't act so surprised: of course Blakey'd be looking out for us. She's good people. She learned how to be good people from the most awesome teammates ever!”

She turned her attention back to Ozpin, in a much lighter mood this time. “Is she here? Do we get to see her?”

“Unfortunately, I chose to take the precaution of having her spent the evening at the guest dorms at Beacon tonight. Her previous reports suggest she might have engendered some bad blood between herself and Miss Nikos. The amount of potential damage the might have been done to the base if a battle ensued between them could become astronomical before things could be explained.”

Jaune expected Pyrrha to protest the idea that she might just go crazy at the very sight of Blake, but not a word came from his side. Looking in her direction, he found that she'd taken the opportunity presented by the former team RWBY's outbursts to address the person on the other side of her: Nora.

RWBY RWBY RWBY

Whether she believed that the strange young woman with the giant hammer was really a Goddess of Thunder, Pyrrha could tell she was hurting and that everyone else had seemingly moved on without really addressing her. Ren might have left the room, but the ruins in his wake remained. How many times back at Beacon had Ren left her to her own problems instead of being a proper partner and friend?

Of course now all the pieces to that puzzle had fallen into place and she at least knew the trauma and loss that left him like that. It was an open secret that he'd lost someone at a young age and never gotten over it. It was clear now that Nora was that someone and Ren wasn't taking it well. Neither was Nora.

“Hey.” She said softly, placing her hand on the despondent woman's shoulder. Nora flinched a little from her staring contest with the table and glanced up. Her turquoise eyes seemed usually dull at the moment, like the life had been drained from them. Not a word escaped her; she only blinked.

Pyrrha took that as an invitation to continue as Yang's loudness held everyone else's attention. “Look, I don't know if you know this, but back in our Academy days, I was Ren's partner.” Something dangerous flashed in Nora's eyes, making Pyrrha stutter a second before clarifying. “Partners in a sense that the school expected us to work together. We weren't even friends. In fact he pushed everyone away. I never really understood it.. or really got over it until just now: he missed you, Nora. So much that he didn't even want to know anyone else because he didn't want it to hurt as much as it did when he lost you if he lost them.”

“He said he didn't remember...” Nora said and even knowing her as little as she did, Pyrrha could tell it wasn't normal for her to sound so unsure of herself.

“He did.” Pyrrha said with ironclad certainty. “I can't tell you exactly what's been going through his head, but I have a good idea. I think you need to go talk to him.”

“But every time I try to talk to him, he gets mad. I don't wanna make him mad anymore; I want
him to be happy.”

Pyrrha concealed her mounting frustration with Lie Ren with a gentle smile. But she swore on the very Dust of creation that if he didn't treat Nora right after this, she was going to make him wish that the Rainbow Bridge—whatever it was—had landed on him.

“I think he's more upset with Ozpin than you right now. And what's really going to make him happy... is you.”

Life shimmered back into Nora's eyes. “You really think so?”

“I really do.” No sooner were the words out of her mouth than Nora enveloped her in a hug that would have been crushing if not for Pyrrha's own strength.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you! See? I knew you would be a great friend! We need to hang out some time. You're probably an awesome warrior too—One day, we should got to Alfheim and beat up a ton of elves! But first, I gotta talk to Ren, 'cause I don't want him to miss out on the elf fighting!” With that, she sprang from her seat and charged out of the room.

That she had no idea where Ren had gone and was likely about to charge around the base like a bull in a Dust shop was something Pyrrha considered a bit of just vengeance on Ozpin for holding so many secrets that really weren't his to withhold.

She felt a small smile tugging at her lips as she looked to her other side and saw the amused look Jaune was wearing. He raised an eyebrow as if to ask what she just did. “Oh, just doing my good deed for the day.”

“You realize they're supposed to be on our 'team', now?” Jaune asked her, keeping his voice low as RWBY (minus B) was still demanding Ozpin do whatever he could to reunite them as son as possible. He mused on that idea. “Sounds familiar: a team of four Hunters? Jaune Arc, Pyrrha Nikos, Lie Ren, Nora Valkyrie. What would be be if we were a Beacon team? JVNL (Juvenile)? PLAN? Eh, not a color name. RNNJ (Orange)?”

Pyrrha rolled her eyes. “We are not going to be another team like PERL. For one, you actually like me.”

“Little more than 'like'.” He said before he could think better of it. They ended up staring at each other for a beat.

Nora's exit, however, hadn't been missed and by now, all eyes in the room were on them. Jaune looked up into the sudden silence and tried to formulate something to say seeing as even Ozpin seemed to be waiting for him to take the lead. He frowned, having missed the conclusion of what the others had been talking about.

“So... Blake?”

“I'm arranging for a small reunion for Team RWBY back at Beacon once our business is concluded here,” replied Ozpin, ever steady.

Jaune leaned forward a little, trying to pretend he wasn't feeling nervous in the other man's presence. “I'm curious as to why an organization dedicated to dealing with the stuff of myths and legends had someone infiltrating the White Fang.”

“I would be happy to provide information on our interests in the White Fang if you agree to the arrangement I mentioned earlier, Mr. Arc. All SHIELD archives up to a certain clearance level will
be fully open to you after that.”

Pyrrha cleared her throat. She of all people was looking markedly uncomfortable to be questioning the Headmaster of Beacon, but she did it anyway, keeping her chin up and her eyes focused on Ozpin. “This all seems too easy. You propose to give us agents and intelligence and yet you don't seem to be asking for anything in return. You must understand that seems highly suspect.”

Not being beholden to anyone, Yang folded her arms. “Yeah, that does seem kind of fishy.”

Ruby cringed and tried to hide behind Weiss. “Yang!” She whispered about as quietly as her normal speaking voice. “You're going to get us in trouble!”

“On the contrary, Miss Rose, they are correct to question my motives. I have, more times than I care to admit, made extremely manipulative choices that favored me far more heavily than those I was bargaining with. In this case, however, I feel it prudent to come clean as they say. At least to an extent.”

He clasped his hands together in front of him. “Founding SHIELD has allowed me to field a great many more resources and cast a much wider net than I would have otherwise. However, in many ways, it also ties my hands. I have people I need to answer to now more than I do in my capacity as Headmaster of Beacon, and regulations that make secrecy in matters that must remain secret impossible.

“Thus, I need a catspaw, Mr. Arc. A highly effective, resource-rich and trustworthy catspaw. I will arm you with knowledge and the bare minimum personnel I can provide you, tell you in an unofficial manner where you might be able to make a difference, and then you will do what you will.”

“While Ren and...” Jaune thought a moment and amended, “...just Ren will be there to look over my shoulder and report back.”

Ozpin splayed his hands out in a kind of manual shrug. “I assumed that much was obvious.”

“Just thought I should make it clear I know,” said Jaune, pursing his lips. “Okay, so the team... me, Pyrrha, Ren, Nora... Ruby, Yang, are you two still in?”

“Are you kidding, you do not see that fight we were in?!” Yang asked, flabbergasted. “How could I not be?!”

“We're right here with you, Jaune!” Ruby said, peeking from behind Weiss and raising a small fist in solidarity.

Jaune raised an eyebrow at Weiss. “Princess?”

The Schnee heiress diverted her focus to the table. “As intriguing as this project seems to be, I was only in Vale to accompany Father, so I regret to say this was a one-time thing. I wish you all luck though.” She did a good job not cringing under the disappointed gazes of her former teammates.

“Aw come on, Icy Weissy!” Yang drawled, “We're just one Blake away from being a team again. And this time there's actual super-powered bad guys and powered armor, and Jaune set an Ursa on fire! What the heck does Daddy dearest have to top that?”

It was an awesome transformation to behold. In the space of one deep breath, the polite, somewhat insecure Weiss who had been playfully exasperated by her friends was gone and the frozen mask of a scion of the Schnee Dust Company settled over her features, as cold, indifferent and unforgiving
as a glacial cliff.

She turned to Yang and drew herself up. In the years since their graduation, she'd come to within a few inches of reaching the brawler's height and her imperious air made up that distance and then some. “If you hadn't been spending the evening trying to become a trophy wife, you might have noticed that before all this happened, Jaune essentially declared open corporate war with my father. This makes him my enemy. And Schnees. Do Not. Give aid and comfort to our enemies.”

A ghost of the person she really was returned as she added, “But we can mitigate fallout and collateral damage. That, Yang, is my place.”

The blonde brawler growled like a lioness pacing in her cage, but looked away. “Fine. I get it.” Then in a flash, she was nose-to-nose with the heiress, “But if you pull this 'Daddy is the greatest even though he's a jackass and a monster' thing when we go see Blake, I swear to Dust...”

Ruby suddenly popped up between them, using strength most people who didn't know her wouldn't suspect she had to push them apart. “Yang!” She said, through her teeth, sounding like a young mother trying to keep an unruly toddler from embarrassing her at the grocery store, “Weiss isn't going to do that. Right Weiss?”

Her partner wasn't spared the little reaper's shaming and turned up her nose haughtily. “I know I was wrong before and I will do my best to make things up to Blake.” She locked eyes with Yang over Ruby's head. “And I do know he's a monster. But he's one better kept where you can see him.”

From where he was sitting, he noticed Ruby shoot a warning glance at Weiss at that and the other woman actually backed down wordlessly. He wondered what was going on there, but Ozpin interrupted his thoughts. “If you were going to inquire about Miss Belladonna, Mr. Arc, she still has several days of debriefing and mandatory downtime. I will however, put her in touch with you: I imagine you have questions.”

Jaune nodded slowly.

Ozpin clapped his hands softly and rose. “Excellent. Then am I to assume we have an accord, Mr. Arc?”

Instead of answering him, Jaune looked to Pyrrha, who returned his gaze with a questioning one of her own. He shook his head. “I wouldn't be here today discussing this if we hadn't come up with this idea together. Besides, you know me Pyrrha, I can't even run a lab with just myself in it; how am I going to lead a team?”

A warm smile spread across her face. “I think you would make a wonderful leader, Jaune.”

“What if I don't want to do it alone?”

She nodded slowly. In all truth, she didn't want to fully take a leadership role after the disaster that was Team PERL, pack of lone wolves they all were. But a joint effort? That she could manage. So she was the one that stood and turned to face Ozpin. “Prof... Director Ozpin, I believe that your accord will be with both Jaune and myself. And you have it.”

The older man bowed his head in deference. “And I hope it is a most fortuitous endeavor. Now, if you will excuse me, I have to make arrangements for he 'reunion'. My associate Miss Goodwitch will be here shortly to arrange for communications and to return you to the city.”

He started to leave, but then turned back. “Oh, and Mr. Arc... she remains unaware of the true purpose of that voice acting sample you commissioned of her three years ago. I recommend you
strive to keep it that way.” Then he was gone to the soundtrack of Jaune gulping.

After a minute to steady himself, Jaune got to his feet. “I’m betting our driver has walked off the clock by now, Pyr. Any objection to staying in the city tonight? I have a suite at the Titan Interkingdom.”

“That sounds like a wonderful idea,” she said, then looked to the members of team RWBY present. “I do hope everything goes well meeting Blake. Ruby, Yang? What do you say, we pick you up around noon to head back to the compound; we have a lot of work to do and not a lot of time.”

“Things do seem to be moving really fast, don't they?” asked Ruby.

Weiss scowled. “Was that a pun? Did you just pun on your speed? Yang, I forbid corrupting Ruby with any more of your poor humor!”

Jaune started to laugh at the argument brewing, but then a sudden realization hit him and he groaned. A gentle touch to his arm brought him face-to-face with an inquisitive look from Pyrrha. “Oh, it's nothing bad... I just realized I need to get in touch with Blanche after this... and I have no idea where she’s staying or what her scroll number is.”

There was a burst of rose petals and a small hand was clapping him on the back. “Don't worry, Jaune,” Ruby announced proudly. “I've got a friend that can help you out. If your sister has a scroll anywhere in Vale city limits, she can find her!”

All it would take was a single call to the Atlasian cruisers stations over Vale to do so...

Chapter End Notes

And so ends The Ball arc. Yes, Blake hasn't 'really' returned yet (She'll be in next chapter), and Weiss isn't on the team yet, but all the pieces are in place for our RWBYengers.

To address a few things, first some people have asked if this fic is going to have WhiteRose in it... if you want to take it as that? I am not opposed to WhiteRose, But. And here's a huge but, I don't really like shipping Ruby herself all that much because I don't really see her as a romantic character. She's silly, she's fun, she's badass, but I never see the spark there that would touch of that kind of chemistry with anyone. However, I'm still going to follow her canon interactions with Weiss and won't say anything to really confirm or deny the nature of their relationship, so feel absolutely free to read into it what you want or if the fancy suits you, do a spin-off fic that makes it official.

Shipping aside, I want to say that I didn't expect it, but Weiss has been a joy to write. I wasn't even sure she was going to be in this fic and now she's gone and grown her own character arc.

I'm worried people are going to hate Ren because he made Nora and Pyrrha sad. There's no real excuse for what he did, but he was definitely as broken by all this as either of them. He's got a bit of a redemption arc that needs to happen all things considered though.
There are a couple of cut scenes here: One was going to have Glynda there and making things awkward of Jaune. There were going to be a few hot for teacher jokes and some bad rom com humor as it slowly dawns on Pyrrha that Jaune had had a crush on Goodwitch. I decided to spare Glynda some dignity there. Then there was going to be a few lines from Ozpin suggesting that he is responsible for the divergence points between this fic and canon... and I decided to leave that be. Noose of Glass is going to be delving into some History of Remnant stuff that's obviously not going to be canon, so why bother trying to play coy about the nature of the AU?

By the way, thanks to the overwhelmingly positive response to Blanche, we'll be seeing more of her and Jaune's second to youngest sister, Gris coming soon. Gris even gets to be a RWBY-fied version of a Marvel character. The hint: the movie was terrible, but the actor went on to play another superhero pretty well... in a much, much worse movie.

Next up, we have some aftermath pieces with Ren and Nora, Team RWBY, Jaune and Pyrrha... and Adam. Remember him? He's still in this fic.
Those Who Were Never Forgotten

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Yeah, we're fine, Blanche. I was just doing m best to make sure you were. Things got really crazy back there.” Jaune paced back and forth on the balcony of his titan InterKingdom Hotel suite, scroll pressed to his eat as it had been for the last half hour as Ruby's friend with a disconcertingly high security clearance hunted down Blanche, verified her safety, and even connected the call for him. Whoever Penelope was, Jaune was already trying to figure out how to get her off General Ironwood's payroll and onto his.

“Of course. I mean there were only seven of the most accomplished Hunters of a generation there. Look, you can see for yourself. How about we meet at the Compound for lunch tomorrow? I'll send a car, I'll cook, it'll be great.”

As Blanche replied, he paused to take in the view. Even past midnight, Vale was alive with light; from traffic on the streets to the clubs, to the skyscrapers where someone was working late. The city was beautiful in ways he normally never noticed.

“Oh, Gris? Of course she can come, I'd be glad to see her! Partner? Oh, the Hunter thing... yeah, I guess he can come too. Not the whole team? Oh, I see. Well sure, we will be glad to have all three of you. It'll be fun. Alright, you too. Have a good night.”

As he ended the call, Jaune let out a little sigh. Reunions could be hard.

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“I really don't remember the dorms being this creepy when we went here.” Ruby had bundled herself up in her cape and was all but glued to Weiss's back as they and Yang made their way down the corridor in the guest wing of the dormitory building.

Weiss tried to turn to glare at her, but Ruby kept her position behind her no matter how much the heiress contorted herself. Finally, she gave up with a huff. “Of course the place is empty: how many guests do you remember visiting Beacon when we didn't have an inter-school event going on like the Vytal Festival? But more importantly, how can this frighten you? Don't think I didn't see that video that got posted online of you trying to take on a Goliath solo.”

“She would have done it too if the stupid army didn't get in the way,” Yang said bitterly while Ruby nodded solemnly.

“You are both dangerous idiots, you know that?”

Yang socked her in the shoulder. It was a playful love tap for the brawler, but it nonetheless would have knocked the heiress over if Ruby hadn't steadied her. “But you love us anyway.”

“Sometimes I daydream about what would have happened if Ruby had picked up the Rook instead of the Knight and I would have been spared your loutish behavior for four years.”

“Ah, but you forget: I'm Ruby's sister, so I'd have been over to your dorm like all the time anyway! Face it, Snowy, I'm like forever your teammate-in-law!” As she laughed at the twitch in Weiss's eye, she finally spied the room number they'd been given before leaving for Beacon. “Here we go girls: we're getting the band back together, assembling one last time, bringing Team RWBY back-
“Just knock on the stupid door!”

Ruby blew a raspberry. “Aw, but she was really getting into it.”

“That's exactly why she had to be stopped.” Weiss folded her arms with a harrumph as Yang banged on the door with her usual restraint—which was to say none at all.

It only took three hammer blows from Yang’s combat-hardened fists for the door top open.

Blake Belladonna stood on the other side, head downcast. She’d made an effort to make herself presentable after having been roused from making an early night of it and retiring to read in bed. She wore a white blouse under a long, black vest with ivory toggles and black dress slacks. Her hair looked to be half-combed though, and what she wasn’t wearing drew their attention more than what she was: her bow, an ever-present accessory during all their years together during and after Beacon was gone, allowing a pair of charcoal cat ears to stand out proudly on top of her head.

“Blakey!” Yang pounced, only to come up short when her partner flinched, tensing up as if expecting to be struck. Pulling up short, she almost ran into the door jam. “Wha? Blake, you okay?”

Yellow eyes glanced up and a look of shame flashed across Blake's normally impassive face. “I was sort of expecting you to hit me.”

“Say what now?” Yang narrowed her eyes as she started connecting dots. Blake had told her and her alone about the whys and wherefores of her departure from the White Fang. Knowing that she’d been back with them, even undercover and with Adam again... it wasn't hard to see why Blake was expecting violence. It made her stomach churn at how angry she'd been in the first few months after Blake disappeared. And a little for hitting Weiss for making it happen. Very little.

“I was kind of expecting it too.” Ruby said, making her feel even worse. “I was ready to tackle you and everything.”

Yang put her hands on her hips as much to reassert control of the situation as to show everyone who seemed to think she was a psychopath exactly where she was keeping her legendary fists. “Well that's not gonna happen. Blake, we all missed you so much!”

“Yeah, and we looked for you. Yang even—ahem—interrogated some White Fang grunts trying to figure out where you went!” Ruby, deciding that Yang’s aborted pounce needed to be completed by someone, zipped over to Blake and threw her arms around her. “I had a friend tapping int Atlas scroll traffic for months hoping to hear something about you!”

Blake stiffened at the contact, then her mask of impassiveness faded and she put her arms around her diminutive team leader. “I'm really sorry about just disappearing, girls. I know what it must have looked like, but believe me, it isn't what you think.”

With the ice now broken by Ruby, Yang stomped up and threw her arms around both her sister and her partner, easily engulfing them. “Look, whatever it was, it's totally water under the bridge. Frozen water under the bridge.” She turned to shoot a glare at Weiss, who was still standing awkwardly in the doorway.

The white-haired woman bit her lip, looking around the guest quarters for anything that might prove a distraction. “L-look, I can't even begin to say how sorry I am, okay? I'll admit it: I was being a weak, foolish little girl and nothing like the friend you should have expected of me after
your years of Beacon and another three working together, Blake. If there's anything I can do to make amends...”

“Weiss?” Blake asked in her customary flat tone.

“Yes?”

“Just get in the damn hug already.”

“I... well.” That was as far as she got before and reached out and grabbed her, pulling her forcefully into the group hug.

They stayed like that for a moment before breaking apart, all taking something different from the experience. Ruby was bouncing on the balls of her feet with a hopeful light in her eyes. Yang threw and arm over Blake's shoulder, looking triumphant. Blake herself looked conflicted, somewhere between content and burdened with more to say.

Weiss edged away from all of them, still looking deeply ashamed.

“It's not your fault, Weiss.” Blake finally said, locking eyes with her.

“How can you say that after what I did? I—“

“Dust, you're still so self-centered.” Blake rolled her eyes and moved past Weiss to push the door closed. Then she returned to the center of the room and indicated the couch and arm chairs the others could take seats in. “Not everything it about you or the team. It was all stupid luck, okay? Yes, I wish you had grown a spine that day, but I get it: you're Daddy's girl and in your case, 'Daddy' is absolutely terrifying.”

Ruby and Yang both nodded at this. “Though, I've gotta say: I've met someone that even make him look just normal horror movie scary now.”

Filing that bit away for later, Blake continued. “I wasn't planning on cutting ties when I left, just getting away from that man. I rented a hotel room and planned to at least call Yang that night. I went to go see a movie... and that's when things got weird. Ozpin told me you guys know about SHIELD now... did he tell you what we do?”

“Apparently give sensitive intelligence information to irresponsible billionaires.” Yang quipped, “Also something about myth and legends coming true and stuff like that. I'm guessing you ran into something from the ookie side?”

Blake nodded, taking a seat on the couch. “I heard the sounds of a fight in an alley and went to see if anyone needed help. What I saw, well... Let's just say Grimm aren't the only ancient evils out there being Hunted.”

“Oh come on,” Ruby protested from the arm chairs he'd claimed for herself, “You've gotta give us more than that! We just fought an ancient evil... or like his servant or something. We can handle it!”

Squeezing her eyes shut, Blake took a deep breath. She knew from experience that Ruby wouldn't let it go. She also knew from experience that her friends might think she was crazy. “Vampires,” she finally spat out. “It was a man... dark skin, long black coat, silver sword... and he was fighting vampires, okay?”

“How did you know they were vampires?” Ruby asked, sitting as far forward as she could like a
“People—even Hunters—don’t usually throw dumpsters or try to bite people with overly-long fangs. They... also tend not to explode into showers of sparks and ash when they get stabbed with silver either.”

Weiss pinched the bridge of her nose. Her weirdness quota had been met and exceeded for the day. “You know what? I'm... just going to go with it. Sure, vampires are a thing, right along side gods of destruction and invisible floating castles. You know what? Maybe my sister is the Winter Maiden while we're at it! I mean she has the right name after all!”

Sensing her partner's distress (after all, who wouldn't at that point?), Ruby reached over and patted Weiss on the knee. “It's been a rough day,” she stage whispered tot he other two, causing Weiss to bat her hand away. Undaunted, Ruby looked to her sister, who already had a gleam in her eye. “Yang, do you know what this means?”

“We might get to fight vampires!” the sisters from Patch chorused excitedly.

“I'm glad the existential threat of the living dead ignites your call to adventure. I really am.” Blake deadpanned.

Coming out of her daydreams of punching hordes of vampires in the face, Yang blinked and cocked her head in her partner's direction. “Hey, if you were off kicking undead butt, how is it you ended up threatening to kill our friends in Vacuo?”

Blake sighed. “I only fought vampires that one time, and SHIELD showed up right after to clean and cover it up. They recruited me and sent me in for training that night.” Then her brain caught up with the rest of her and she did a double take. “Wait... your friends? You mean Jaune Arc and Pyrrha Nikos?”

“I know, small world right?” Yang grinned.

RWBYRWBYRWBY

The SHILED HQ had facilities they called 'cubes'. These weren't typical office cubicles, but combination offices-slash-bunks where agents on duty could get their paperwork done, grab a shower or a few hours of sleep in relative privacy as they required.

They were cramped, impersonal spaces with a desk (complete with computer console), bunk, bathroom and absolutely nothing else.

Lie Ren had cloistered himself in one such cube following Ozpin's little revelation, hoping to be able to sort himself out before returning to the mission. He was pretty sure that had been a couple of hours ago and he still couldn't trust himself not to pull out Stormflower the next time he saw the Director.

Damn that man.

Everything with him was oh-so-subtle nudges and manipulations, treating life like a game of chess. Yes, it often led to successful missions, but at the same time, Ren hated feeling like a piece on a board.

It was for the greater good that he let it happen. Because the strange, the out of place, the superhuman... those things needed to be kept in check so that what happened to the only person he'd ever given a damn about didn't happen to anyone else.
And then he learned that Ozpin had turned her into a game piece too. That's where he drew the line. That was the Unforgivable Sin.

Ren had dedicated his life to her memory, forsaking all others as distractions in his need to get stronger just so he could stand up to beings like the warrior who appeared in a haze of rainbow light, decimated a Grimm invasion single-handedly... and then stole Ren's best friend away.

Telling him to ask what some strange woman's life was like? Ozpin knew him better than that—knew he didn't care a single iota. If it hadn't been for the debriefing, ten thousand years might have passed and Ren never would have asked about Nora's past, would never have found out...

He rubbed his face with the heels of his hands and slumped over the desk.

He knew now. He knew and he felt like he should be celebrating. Nora was that same girl; his fellow orphan who had been beside him through thick and thin for three years before the Rainbow Bridge entered and then sundered their lives. Now she was back and... what now?

More than anything, he felt shame. Shame hat he'd somehow forgotten her name and face. Shame at how he'd been treating her like a burden since they met. At how he'd treated... everyone in all that time. His fellow agents, his fellow students... No, he hadn't missed Pyrrha's reaction to him. He just hadn't cared until a tiny new bit if information had forced some introspection onto him.

“Dust, what am I going to do now?” he muttered to the wood grain of his desk.

His despair was interrupted by rapid-fire knocking on the door of the next cube. “Ren? Are you there? They don't have any number on these things like in the Hall of Halls. Ren?” This was followed by an almighty cracking sound, the noise of a metal door being forcibly removed from its frame, most likely via Uru metal warhammer. He'd actually heard it a few times already.

“Guess you're not in this one. Oh well.”

Now that he was listening, Ren could hear armored footfalls coming his way. Pushing aside all his issues with the situation, Ren rose from his chair, reaching the door just as the first knocks started. He got it open just in time to see Nora rearing back with Magnhild, ready to deal with that door as well

“Ren!” Nora dropped the hammer, leaving a sizable dent in the floor, and launched herself at him, crushing him in a mighty bear hug. “Gosh, I've been looking all over for you. Then this nice blonde lady said you were probably down here, but nothing down here is labeled, so I decided I would have to knock on every door—only then I thought you might be sleeping and not hear me, so I had to break down a few doors. Sorry if I woke you, I just... well Pyrrha told me that you'd definitely need to talk to me, and I didn't want you to think I wasn't there when you needed, 'cause you were always there when I needed when we were little.”

She paused for breath, but her hold was so tight that Ren couldn't draw enough breath to both speak an not pass out. Burying her face in his shoulder, she continued, “And I am here, Ren. I really am. I'm really sorry I left, but they thought it was too dangerous with the Grimm and all, so the sent Heimdall to come get me. But I didn't forget, I tried to get them to send me back all the time. I tried yelling and begging and being bad and everything until my brother finally convinced my father the Midgard needed me, and here I am, Ren! Forever. I promise, okay? So don't be sad or mad anymore, please?”

“N-nora?” he finally managed.
She let him go and hopped back half a step, looking up at him with big, watery eyes. “Yeah, Ren?”

Steeling himself from shaking, Ren reached out, putting on hand, then the other on her shoulders. He paused there, steadying himself and meeting her eyes. It was unbelievable to him that he hadn't recognized those eyes. As much as she'd grown and changed, those remained the same.

After what felt like forever, He pulled her to him and enveloped her in a hug of his own. “Welcome home.”

Adam Taurus normally liked the heat; it was one of the reasons he moved his personal base of operations to the Vacuo desert. Now he was back in Vale of all places, and finding himself in a warehouse that felt like the bowels of Tartarus.

As much as he wanted to be out of the place, he had to appreciate it, as that building was in many ways the core of the White Fang's power in that part of the world. It was there that they forged the weapons for their Dust-users, there that their stolen caches of Dust were refined into specialized forms and their vehicles were refitted for combat against police and armed forces alike.

And here that his future was being assembled.

His chief engineer, a deer faunus with a pair of stubby antlers on her head, had her hand on the gantry control as the steel and fiberglass cage they were riding in rose to the level where the project he wanted to reserve was being worked on.

“We're ahead of schedule, so it won't be an issue giving it a test run like you wanted.” She said, shouting over the sounds of riveters and plasma torches and other heavy machinery, “There was only one little snag!”

Adam narrowed his eyes. “And just what was that?”

“The power source! It was nowhere to be found at the crash site. Conventional dust reactors proved to be... well far too heavy to be viable. While everything else was coming together, we lost days trying to come up with just how Arc did it!”

The gantry jerked to a stop and the engineer lifted the door for Adam to step out.

“It took the top faunus minds in the field of Dust days to figure out what he did?” Adam asked, keeping his eyes forward, jaws set.

“Well... we don't think he used Dust at all, sir.”

“Didn't use... Didn't use Dust? He put this thing together in about a week! In a cave! With a BOX OF SCRAPS!” His voice echoed in the cavernous space of the warehouse. “How could he have possibly come up with a whole new power source under those conditions?!”

The engineer shied away from him, eyes flicking to his sheathed katana. All of the White Fang knew what it could do and feared it. “W-well a few years ago, he did introduce an alternative energy source. He called it an Arc Reactor. Only the prototype was larger than a house in Menagerie. I-it's possible that he found a way to miniaturize it.”
Adam ground his teeth. “Well we don't have one of those, now do we?”

“N-no sir, but as I was going to say, that's no longer a problem.”

“And how's that?”

She swallowed and licked her lips before continuing. “Our benefactor sent us a gift. We think it's an unusually stable Shock crystal, but more study is required—but it works perfectly in powering the suit. Better than perfect, even. We've been able to install capacitors to store up energy for even more directed energy weapons.”

Their walk ended at a scaffold where there stood a ten-foot tall suit of powered armor. It had a visored helm and its shoulders were heavily built to store banks of capacitors. White Fang grunts were scrambling up and down the scaffold applying metallic red paint to the exterior armor.

“the Shock crystal is now so integral to the design that we decided to name the armor after it. Sir, allow me to present to you... the Crimson Dynamo.”

Chapter End Notes

So there you have it! Blake is in the story finally (after a run-in with Blade apparently because someone asked if there was a Blade in this universe)!

Actually, we tied up a lot of stray plot threads here. We found out why Blake really left and how she joined SHIELD, Ren and Nora are finally together (but not together-together), and Adam is back in action was Crimson Dynamo.

Speaking of, I tried really hard to bend him into being Titanium Man. Why? Because one of the Titanium Men was named Bullinski. Buuut, it also turns out that one of the 13 (!) Crimson Dynamos hated Iron Man because he blamed his lover's death on him. Coincidence? Almost certainly.

Next is going to be mostly fluff with Jaune and Pyrrha because there hasn't been much of that recently, and Jaune did promise her that dance.
Ten Months Ago

Sometimes big advances came from tiny details.

That principle was why the large-scale holoprojector in the lab was currently showing five variants of the Packbuster anti-Grimm munitions' shrapnel, each image surrounded by a cloud of simulation data.

“So the complaint Ironwood has is that the current Packbuster is throwing shrapnel through Grimm without killing them, giving them a chance to escape and heal up.” Jaune explained as he and Pyrrha poured over the data. “Of course, it'd be nice if Grimm had any anatomy to speak of, but my idea is to reduce main stopping power in favor of shrapnel that sticks inside them and prevents them from healing if it fails to kill them. That way, if the Packbuster doesn't kill them, it gives the local Hunters an easier time with the clean-up.”

“Couldn't you do a mix?” Pyrrha asked, “High velocity pieces to do more immediate damage with the lower velocity ones to get the 'sticky' quality?”

Jaune hummed, leaning back in his seat. “If we do that, we'd have to redesign the whole explosive charge so it doesn't destroy one or the other when it goes off. Plus, I'm not all that sure the high velocity even do that much damage to Grimm. They tend to die when they're dismembered, but just putting holes in them seems to do nothing unless its a head shot.”

“That's true. At least at the academies, they emphasis headshots over the torso.” Pyrrha rested her chin in her palm. “It really would be nice if someone did some comprehensive studies on Grimm biology.”

Before Jaune could reply, a chime sounded and Glynda's voice interrupted. “It is seven forty-five, Mr. Arc. You requested an alarm at this time.”

“Oh, that's right.” Jaune started saving and backing out of his various auto-CAD programs and the holograms disappeared. “Knocking off early today, Pyr.”

She gave him a questioning look before shutting down her own workstation. “Why's that?”

“The Spec-Fic Network is having a back-to-back showing of all three Master of the Gems movies—the extended editions! It's the Fantasy event of the year.”

Seeing his geeky enthusiasm made Pyrrha smile. “Well that sounds grand. I'm sure you'll enjoy yourself.”

“Actually...” Jaune paused at his work. “Didn't you tell me once you missed seeing them in theaters?”

“I was in Menagerie then and they don't get many first-run movies down there,” she admitted, “but I have seen them more recently when they came out on cable.”

“Were they the extended versions.”
“No, I suppose not.”

“And did you have a ridiculously huge TV like mine?” Jaune pressed. When Pyrrha shook her head, he stood up with a grin. “How about you watch them with me? It's more fun to watch movies with someone anyway, right?”

That was true, and something she'd only recently learned in her employ under him. Sometimes, Jaune's work ethic called an early day around ten in the morning and they would end up doing all sorts of things instead of working, from playing video games, to watching movies. She had to admit that watching while lounging on the super-comfy couch in the living room with a movie on the gigantic TV and Jaune offering the occasional color commentary was a far sight better than curling up on her couch alone at home.

“Well, I would like to, but aren't each of those movies almost three hours long? That's nine hours of movies.”

Jaune looked a tiny bit put out. “Oh. Yeah, I guess you have things to do tomorrow seeing as it's the weekend, huh?”

Pyrrha pursed her lips. “No, not really. But I was up at seven to get here; I'll either fall asleep during the movie, or be too tired to drive home after...”

A bit of light returned to Jaune's eye. “Oh, well you can crash in one of the guest rooms. Heck, it'd be nice to get some use out of them for once.”

That reminded her of something she'd wanted to ask for some time. “You designed the whole compound, didn't you?” He nodded. “Then why did you put in so many rooms you don't use?”

The blond blushed a little. “Yeah, well when I first got that big contract with Ironwood, I figured that being a big-shot rich guy would mean I would have a ton of friends, throwing crazy parties every week. I didn't imagine that most of my 'peers' these days would be assholes. Torchwick is somehow the least objectionable guy in my current social circle. Y' know, except you, Ruby, and Yang. And Velvet, I guess, but she's usually too busy with her old team now that she's back in Vale to hang out.”

It was a constant mystery to Pyrrha, Jaune's lack of a social life. He was a bit awkward, but he was outgoing, fun to be with, and an all-around good person. Given her own experience, she expected him to at least have a mob of false friends and hangers on and other people trying to take advantage of him, but no: he was pretty much alone except for his military liaison, her sister, his public relations executive, and her, his assistant-slash-bodyguard.

Hearing him give voice to some of that loneliness dissolved any other reservations she had about staying over; not out of pity, but out of a form of kinship. She'd been there. Dust, she was there. Between her strict training as a youth and teen and the isolation that came with her celebrity, she was so socially stunted that the only friends she'd made since Menagerie were... well the only friends Jaune had. And to tell the truth, she didn't feel she needed more.

“You know, I have been curious what got added in the extended editions. I'd be happy to watch them with you.”

Jaune grinned like a kid visiting a candy shop for the first time. “Sweet! We should order some take-out: nine hours of sword fights and magic isn't something you can get through with just popcorn, you know?”
That was the start of it. Once the precedent had been set, Jaune was a lot less shy about extending invitations to do things that might extend well into the night and Pyrrha was less shy about accepting and later sleeping in the guest room. From there, it just progressed naturally: if she was worn out from a long day, she'd stay over; if they'd just got back from a business trip and they were jet-lagged, she'd stay over. Eventually, it got so frequent that she stashed some toiletries of her own and a couple of changes of clothes in the guest room. Then a few more personal items to make it more comfortable.

Then she got up one night to find Jaune drunk and stumbling around in the lab. That meant she had to keep a closer eye on him, and so sometimes she stayed over just because she thought he might be in a drinking mood that night. Which led to some late night talks on the couch or in the rec room over a game of pool.

Around that time, she'd started getting up early and making breakfast and from there it became a ritual, a routine. Until one day she woke up and realized that she hadn't been back to her apartment in Vale in a week—and also realized that didn't bother her: everything she really needed or wanted was at the Arc Compound and Jaune didn't seem to mind having her around 24/7, so she stayed.

Stayed until both their worlds changed.

Pyrrha wasn't normally one for taking long showers—well they tended to be longer than most people's because she had to wash an extra three feet of hair, but in a relative sense. Her schedule had been too busy since she was eight years old to waste time luxuriating in the hot water, singing in the naturally amazing acoustics of a shower stall, or ruminating to any extent. She had training to get to, Grim to hunt, hunters-in-training to mentor and most recently, a boss to keep on task.

Tonight things were a bit different. Tonight, stepping into the show in Jaune's on-hold suite had been the first moment she clearly had to just think and let things sink in since she stepped into the limo on the way to the Charity Ball.

And Dust, there was a lot to think about.

There were dangers in the world as bad as if not worse than Grimm. That had been an eye-opener even without the fairy-tale twist. Myths and legends she didn't even know might be crawling out of the woodwork spoiling for a fight and until that very night, she would have been woefully unprepared. Had been woefully unprepared in the case of the Juggernaut.

Just the fact that he was the Juggernaut and no longer really Cardin Winchester made her blood go cold. As disgraceful, cruel and bigoted as he'd been when she'd known him, the idea that something had gotten into him and twisted him up into some sort of servitor to a great, faceless evil... She shivered even under the flow of hot water. Could that happen to her? Was there something out there that might alter her into something to be used against people—against her friends and loved ones?

Mistral had a lot of tales of people transfigured by old gods, taken by them, seduced by them... but nothing like what Cytorrak was capable of, she was sure. One things was certain: she didn't want to find out, but it seemed the Ozpin was dragging her and Jaune onto that course regardless.

It felt almost petty by comparison when her thoughts strayed to the new 'team' and her guts clenched almost worse that at the thought of being possessed by ancient evil.

Leading (co-leading, but still) another team. She hadn't wanted to lead PERL in the first place and
now it was being foisted on her again. Yes, Jaune had offered her an out, but the whole Elite Hunter idea had been hers and it would have been wrong on many levels to abandon him to that duty after the fact. He might have been a great speaker and an engineering genius, but he would have been a babe in the woods when faced with all the niggling politics and cat-herding she'd gone through at Beacon.

Oh yes, and then there was the matter of Lie Ren. After hearing the reason he'd been the way he'd been, she wanted to forgive him. That's what she should do as the demure, polite and exemplary Champion so many looked up to even now. But as a person... well understanding wasn't the same as forgiving. The fact that he'd suffered didn't erase the real hurt of having the olive branch of friendship and camaraderie she'd extended slapped back in her face time after time, all the times she'd been left alone with her demons because he waned to be alone with his.

It was a miracle that she wasn't the proud mother of a bouncing baby ulcer in just the few hours sense that discussion.

She would try to forgive and forget, but only if he did right by Nora. Goddess or no, Pyrrha had seen a lot of her old self in the young woman who tried to keep up her joyful exterior even as an external force ripped and tore at her self-confidence and faith in humanity. She'd seen the light in Nora's eyes and had seen it flee when Ren stormed out. At some point, they had bonded on a level he and Pyrrha steadfastly hadn't and it meant so much to Nora. If that light wasn't in her eyes when next they met... well Pyrrha would not be held responsible for her actions. For some reason, probably how carefree and just plain friendly Nora acted when they first met, she was feeling very protective of the Goddess of Storms, as silly as that might sound.

Realizing she was taking much, much longer than she ought to, Pyrrha turned her attention to a much smaller, but far more immediate problem. If the scale between 'there are monsters out there so terrifying that man and faunus kind had to make up softer, gentler tales to avoid going gibbering insane, and oh yes, I would quite like you to fight them' and 'you have to take up a job you hated the first time alongside the asshole you had hoped never to see again' was petty, then this was just plain stupid in her opinion.

Yet, it was an actual problem that actually had to be confronted.

It went thusly: The only reason Jaune kept a suite in Vale proper was just in case the Arc compound needed fumigation, renovation or some other 'ation' that meant he couldn't stay there. As careless as he was ti money sometimes, he liked to be prepared.

However, none of those circumstances had ever really come up and the last time Jaune had stayed in the suite was over two years ago. Two years being well before the idea of Pyrrha staying over at the compound became a thing. In fact, when they traveled, she always had her own suite on principle.

This presented a few logistical issues. One, the suite had only the one bedroom with a single, king-sized bed. Yes, they were a couple now, but only for less than a week and they hadn't been what Pyrrha would timidly describe as 'physical' at all. Not that she had more of a problem with that than sheer nerves, but there was issue number two: the suite had plenty of spare clothes of Jaune, but none for her. And she'd arrived wearing a ball gown.

Which, she realized, was playing a larger part in why she was hiding in the shower than she wanted to admit. That thought finally convinced her to shut off the water and grab some towels both to dry her body and to wrangle her sodden hair. Past a certain length and normal blow-dryers were useless before a good wringing out and toweling off.
Ten minutes later, she emerged into the suite's main room wrapped in a fluffy, white hotel robe, slightly damp hair fanned out around her and falling into her face.

The living area was empty, though the television was on, showing an infomercial from some dubious hunk of metal and plastic the promised to be the only piece of exercise equipment one would ever need. That brought a rueful smile to her lips as she remembered being tapped to endorse something along those lines. She'd backed out when the flimsy bungee cord that gave her review version its tension snapped under her strength and would have likely split open her cheek if not for her aura.

And that hadn't be the worst thing she'd been asked to hawk over the years.

A brief search for Jaune turned up a silhouette moving around on the suite's expansive balcony. Padding across the thick, luxurious carpet on bare feet, she pulled open the double glass doors to greet him, only to find his back to her as she talked on the phone.

The air was chill, but she shrugged it off as she paused to admire him, still in his suit which still did him great justice despite being rumpled and dusty from the night's festivities. The shattered moon hung just over his head, forming an imperfect halo as she finally tuned in what he was saying as well as the responses on the other end thanks to her aura-enhanced hearing.

“I just wanted to thank you again for your help, Ms. Polendina.”

“Oh, it was no problem, Mr. Arc! Any friend of Ruby's is a friend of mine!”

Jaune chuckled at that. “The same, but I really, really appreciate you working late to locate my sister. If there's any way I can return the favor, just ask.”

There was a long pause and then, “Well actually... I did have something I've wanted to ask, Mr. Arc.”

“You can call me Jaune. After all, any friend of Ruby's is a friend of mine too.”

“Oh, that's wonderful! Then you can call me Penelope!”

That made Pyrrha raise an eyebrow. In her first year of Beacon, there had been a sensational uproar about one of Atlas's entries into the Vytal tournament, a Penny Polendina. It had been leaked (later, it turned out the Wilhelm Schnee) that Penny was, in fact, not a human and in reality part of something called Project Simple Soul; a Program under General Ironwood that had to do with Aura and soul manipulation that had resulted in a robot that could generate Aura with an AI that could mimic—or perhaps experience—human emotion.

People had cause an uproar over the very idea of an artificial human—especially a young girl—and Penny had been withdrawn back to Atlas mere days before the finals. Rumor had it that there was a real Penny Polendina out there of whom the robot was a copy. Pyrrha wondered if Ruby had known that whole time, or if she'd just met Penelope by chance later.

Sometimes it seemed like the world ran on fated meetings.

While Pyrrha was thinking, Penelope was still talking. “Well you see Arc Industries recently added my fleet—well it isn't actually my fleet, I'm just a programming technician—to the Arc Network. Only, part of the contract was that the Arc software was to remain under Black Box protections.”

“Wait... they won't let you look at the code?” Jaune asked.
“You didn't know?”

“I've... been kind of indisposed while all this was going on,” he pointed out.

“Oh yes, the White Fang! That must have been terrible for you, sir! It's a very good thing you and your assistant managed to escape.”

Jaune paused and Pyrrha was forced to assume that like her, he was being put off by Penelope's odd cadence and inordinate enthusiasm for literally everything she said. “Uh... yeah. But anyway, like I said, I wasn't around for that contract and I'm shocked Ironwood or whoever commands the locally stations fleet would agree to that: how are tech like you supposed to fix problems if you can't look at the code?”

“That was exactly my issue, Jaune! I was wondering if you might do something about it? Not that I suspect your software, but there could be any number of issues with integrating the network protocols into the fleet's systems.”

Only able to guess at more than half of them, Jaune was still forced to agree. “Right. So I can't change the contract obviously, but how about this: I am going to temporarily hire you as an outside consultant and task you with overseeing the network integration. Sound good.”

“Oh yes, that sounds like it would sidestep the problem most efficiently. Thank you, Jaune!”

“No problem; after all, you helped me out.” He paused, then: “Listen, if you find anything odd or out of place with the code, let me know okay?”

“Naturally!”

“Thank you very much Penelope. I'll speak with you later then.”

“Have a good night!”

“You too.” Jaune closed the scroll with a quiet sigh.

Pyrrha chose that time to make her presence known, striding up behind him and enveloping him in a backward hug. “Sounds like you've certainly kept yourself occupied.”

He crossed his arms over hers, covering her hands with his, leaning back into the hug. “Yeah, Ruby's friend came through on getting in touch with Blanche. She, Gris and Gris's partner from Beacon are coming over tot he compound tomorrow.

“That sounds grand. I really enjoyed meeting Blanche.” Pyrrha rested her chin on his shoulder.

Jaune laughed a little. “As long as Gris isn't as hyperactive as she was as a kid. Then we could be in trouble.” He paused a bit before adding, “You'll probably like her through: you know how you were four time Mistral champ?” Pyrrha hummed her confirmation into his neck. “Yeah, well she's two-time Signal champ, and she won the Vytal tournament last year.”

“You really do keep tabs on them even though you don't call or visit, huh? I wonder why I never noticed.” She felt it as his shoulders slumped, but she couldn't feel sorry for asking: it felt like something she should know about him.

“I kind of made sure to keep it that way.” Jaune admitted. “I didn't want to talk about my... situation... with my father.”
She gave him a quick squeeze before disengaging and allowing him to turn around. Giving him a quick peck on the lips, she said, “I promise I won't pry into that. But I would like to hear it when you're ready.”

“Y-yeah...” was all he could manage on the subject. His hands started to fall to her waist when his eyes finally took in more than her face—like how her robe had come open while she was hugging him. Whatever else was on his mind was instantly overridden. “I—um... are you wearing nothing but a robe.”

Quickly grokking to what happened, Pyrrha pulled the collar of the robe shut and reached with her free hand to secure the tie. This time she knew her face was burning with embarrassment. “Oh! I... um, that was not on purpose. I... well you see, I don't have any clothes here.”

Deciding that the starry sky above was the most appropriate celestial body to set his eyes on right now, Jaune rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. “Oh, right... Well I mean, I'm sure you could wear something of mine. I've got plenty of shirts and stuff here.”

She gave him a look, half coy, half wondering if he knew what he was saying. “Just shirts?”

Eyes still fixed skyward, he gave a nervous laugh. “What guy wouldn't want to see his girlfriend parading around the hotel room with just his shirt on, long legs sticking out...”

“I'm afraid that as tall as I am, it's unlikely to just be my legs on display.” Pyrrha averted her eyes too, shocked at herself for pointing that out.

Determined to get through his rambling, Jaune tried to ignore that mental image (while filing it away for later) and plunged ahead with more nervous chuckling. “Beside, gotta set some ground rules on who wears the pants around her, right?”

There was a beat in which they could hear the awkward tension in the air shrivel up and die before Pyrrha gave him a glare and socked him in the shoulder, causing him to stumble back a step. “That was awful! You've been spending way too much time around Yang!”

He grinned at her and gave a shrug. “Sure lightened the mood though, right?”

“I suppose.”

“Good, we should probably get inside then: I'm sure you're cold and room service will be here any minute.” The fact that he could have mentioned he'd seen that she was cold and didn't was proof that Yang hadn't quite completely corrupted him.

Pyrrha nodded and led the way back through the double doors. “You ordered room service?”

“Those energy bars back at SHIELD HQ weren't hitting on anything for me, so I'm sure they weren't enough for you either. Man, Aura really revs up the metabolism, doesn't it?”

They both took seats next to each other on the couch as Pyrrha nodded, “Some say it's the price Hunters pay for their power and prestige. It might even be the one factor that keeps Hunters from ruling over those without an awakened Aura.”

Jaune squinted in confusion. “How's that?”

“I'm sure you've noticed, but before I unlocked your Aura, I consumed at least ten times the calories you do. Convert that to the cost of keeping up that diet and how much work I would have to put into completing missions just to pay for that plus supplies if I wasn't working for you and
you should start to see a picture: Hunters, for all of our powers, are on a constant treadmill just to earn enough to stay exactly where we are. Only those who turn criminal or work for a private concern will ever make enough to save up or have enough free time to ever get... ambitious, if you catch my meaning.”

He did. “The most powerful among us can literally be starved into submission if it comes to it. That would almost sound like an amazing miracle of design until I remember Torchwick and then it's kind of terrifying.”

Pyrrha hummed her agreement. They both fell into silence for a while, idly watching another infomercial for some kind of necklace that held a magnetic pen. For people who had neither pockets, nor flat surfaces in their homes. Eventually, she broke the not-really-awkward silence. “So... there's only one bedroom...”

“Yeah, about that; I can sleep on the couch. I mean it's a nice couch, very comfortable. I'll just get a few blankets and...” He was silenced by another quick kiss.

Smiling up at him as she pulled away, Pyrrha mustered her courage. “Jaune, we're both adults. Maybe we aren't at that stage where we might... get physical... I think we're both mature enough to share a bed in the more literal sense, don't you?”

To be honest, he wasn't sure he was, but he wasn't going to say 'no'. He was saved from whatever stupid thing his mouth was going to say by the arrival of their room service.

After an extremely late dinner and a viewing of yet another infomercial about a 'scientifically designed' dish rag, the young couple finally checked their scrolls to find that it was past four in the morning. “We should probably get some sleep if we want to meet your sisters in the morning.” Pyrrha said, standing up.

Jaune rose with her, but caught her hand before she could leave. “Actually... I'm not super-tired yet, and Glynda can let them in if we're a little late...” He fiddled with his scroll, syncing it to the room's entertainment system to start the surround sound playing a slow classical song. “I was wondering if we could have that dance now?”

Turning to him, Pyrrha slung her arms over his shoulders. “I would love to.”

Leaning in, Jaune kissed her deeply before saying. “You really are an extraordinary woman, Pyrrha Nikos.”

“And you are a singular man, Jaune Arc.”

The pair danced for a half hour before even their Auras couldn't keep them going after the excitement of the day and they were forced to retire to the bedroom. There, for the first time, they fell asleep in each other's arms.

Chapter End Notes

RWBYRWBYRWBY

Yeah, there was a lot of fluff here, but the other genre is Romance, so you get what you pay for.
I'm actually a sucker for a good love story—not the kind where a misunderstanding drives the couple apart so there's a forced conflict in Act 3, but real love stories about building relationships. So I am totally without apology for this chapter.

I have to say it is very hard to write a romance between two incredibly awkward people without playing the blush card—and I am not fond of having grown people (which they are in this fic) blush, but... had to do it this time. I think this was an appropriate usage of it.

Also, as if to compensate, this chapter is just brimming with my literary student bullshit: foreshadowing, callbacks, themes... oy.

On to some fan requests/comments:

Some people have expressed a desire for X-men to be represented here seeing as this is a Marvel universe fic. Now, I love the X-men. New Mutants Vol3 and Academy X brought me back into comics, Kyle and Yost ruining that plus Civil War angered me into launching my own writing career (as in literally Chris Kyle challenged me to do better. Ten years later, I'm writing one of the longest-running superhero serials on the internet and he... wrote Necrosha. I win.). So I naturally kind of want to...

But I'm out of characters from RWBY. Like, I've got Ciel, Flint and Katt and that's pretty much everyone that had any plot relevance—and Ciel is stretching it. The rest of Cardinal are planned for something, Team CFVY are being left un-Marveled so we're still rooted in Remnant... I'm tapped.

Here is what I could do though: if Gris gets a decent reception, I could spin her off into a separate fic that deals with an X-men style situation with Signal-aged Ocs. Fair warning, I have never done a fully OC story inside a fan-made world though. It could be awful. But, if you guys want it, I am nothing if not a humble servant of my audience (unless they ship Warrick and Cyn in my webserial. Then I will cut you).

The other thing people keep asking in PM is about Jaune's Semblance.

Well Jaune doesn't have one. Nope. Not in the little multiverse of stories I'm writing (speaking of which, I'm imaging this, Game On, my Power Rangers idea... which might still be Game On, and the S4 type thing I have on tap to be part of a singular multiverse. Because I do that.). Jaune has no Semblance. He can make do without it because he is Batman, or Sokka... or BatSokka (Wolfbatman, anyone).

Believe me, I've thought about it, and considered things like Friend Shield or buffing his allies, or some sort of Perfect Defense, but I honestly think he's a more interesting character without it. I mean, yeah, he needs Aura not to die in the RWBYverse, but I don't think he needs a superpower. Incidentally, I felt the same way about Ron Stoppable getting Monkey power: it kind of takes away some of the reason I love this archetype, especially when they're already balanced by a hypercompetent partner anyway.

But anyway, I'm done now.
Snoring.

Snoring like someone was trying to cut gravel with a chainsword that had terrible issues with its engine to start with.

Blake Belladonna cracked her eyes open to find an unfamiliar ceiling. That wasn't any source of distress for her: years with the White Fang, plus years as part of SHIELD and then a few months back with the White Fang had made seeing a whole week's worth of the same ceiling feel like a novelty, four years at Beacon being the exception.

The snoring was vaguely familiar too, harking back to those same four years and also drawing memories of the previous night back into focus. Yang had brought several bottles of Ouzo from Mistral and thought it would be the best thing to crack open in celebration of Team RWBY's reunion.

Everyone had asked after her adventures in SHIELD, which prompted Yang to try and top her tales with those from her work with the Reclaimer teams. Then Ruby got into it with stories from the Atlas military, which finally drew Weiss out to tell them a few choice tales as head of the SDC's security division.

Then Yang started just making up stories, then so did Ruby. So Blake told them some of the more unbelievable true stories she'd been through like the madwoman who actually found a magic mirror and had used it to go on a killing spree in her town to try and 'move up the ranks' of being the 'fairest of them all'. It hadn't helped when the mirror named her fairest of them all once she entered the village.

That got an argument started on who was the fairest of Team RWBY... and after that things turned into a big of a drunken blur that somehow included Yang silencing Weiss's strident assertions that is was her by stuffing an apple in the heiress's mouth.

Having a go at sitting up, Blake found that she was lying on the couch. Across from her, she could see her bed—with all the covers and pillows piled up on the floor so that Ruby could curl up in a nest of them. Her cloak looked to be close to choking her as it was pulled up not the bed and fist into the hands of a certain heiress who was trying to use the red material as a blanket.

Anyone that might suggest that Weiss Schnee snored like an Ursa going through a chipper-shredder was in for a loud, unwinnable argument, even when that awful noise was aggravating the hangover that was starting to kick in.

Blake groaned and turned her head just in time to see a glass of... something... thrust into her view. It looked like it probably tasted a lot better going down than it had coming back up and reeked of booze and hot sauce. “Just like old times, huh?” Yang was, as per usual, obnoxiously bright-eyed and bushy-tailed following a night of drinking.

“A prairie oyster? Really?” Blake muttered, trying to push the drink out of her face.

“Nope.” Yang said, popping the 'p'. “No eggs in here. This is Big Momma Yang's special blend of hair of the dog, caffeine, and Hunter-grade painkillers.”
Blake gave her a level look. “Then why do I smell hot sauce?”

“Pfft. ‘Cause it’s not a hangover cure if it doesn't have at least one stupid ingredient that makes it gross.”

“Your logic is as sound as always.” Blake still took the glass and downed it because, painkillers.

Yang plopped down on the sofa beside her. “You know you love it, Blakey!” Her grin half-faded as something occurred to her. “Say, we totally forgot to ask you the thing we were coming here to ask you last night.”

“Ozpin said something about a team.” Blake mused, “But I’m grounded for the next couple of weeks.” At Yang's confused expression, she elaborated, “I just faked my death a few weeks ago. My handlers are hoping my ‘loss' will make Adam unstable and cause him to make a mistake soon.”

The blonde made a face. “You know, I wasn't happy at all hearing they sent you back to that. Didn't you tell them how things were when you left the first time?”

Blake too the time to get into a more comfortable sitting position, curling her legs up under her body and bowing her head. “Yeah, they knew, but that's exactly what made me the best person to place in deep cover with the White Fang. To be honest, I leapt at the chance: I wasn't the impressionable, smitten girl I was last time, you know?”

“Yes, but...” Yang didn't finish the thought, instead asking what was really on her mind. “You didn't have to...”

“I would have killed him if he tried.” Blake cut her off. Then her expression softened. “I convinced him I was still traumatized from spending so many years being ‘corrupted' by humans. That seemed to do the trick: his delusions are stronger than ever these days. The truth of systematic bigotry isn't enough for him these days, everything has to be a concerted conspiracy on the part of humanity.”

Yang shrugged, “Well, I mean Weiss's dad certainly does his part keeping things going that way.”

“Unless Wilhelm Schnee has a mass mind control device, this isn't all his fault—even if he might want to take credit for it. Not like the White Fang itself isn't helping foster even worse views on faunus.”

“True.” The heaviness of the conversation was starting to get to Yang, so she switched gears. “Say... you know that last part where you faked your death? The people you guys captured?”

Blake sighed. “I wish you wouldn't lump me in with 'you guys', but yeah. I guess you saw all that stuff on TV?”

“And heard about it from the horse's mouth. Jaune and Pyrrha are friends of mine. Ruby's too.”

Yellow eyes widened. “Seriously?”

“Oh yeah, and if you want in on that team Ozpin mentioned? They're going to be leading it.” She gave her friend a predatory smile, going in for the kill. “Oh, an you know that thing that happened over at Sienna Crossroads?”

The cat faunus buried her head in her hands. “That was them, wasn't it? I had an idea seeing as I'd never seen armor like that but... Dust, do they know you know me?”
“Yuuuuu-p. They didn't argue when I said I'd ask if you wanted in on the team either.”

“WHY?!” Blake cut herself off in a whisper for the benefit of those still sleeping. “Did they even tell you what happened in Vacuo? I wasn't exactly friendly even if I was doing my best to give them a chance to escape. I almost came to blows with Nikos, did they tell you that?”

“No, but that would have been an awesome fight,” Yang mused. “Not as awesome as our spars, but hey, what is?” She clapped a hand on Blake's shoulder and pulled the other woman into a side hug. “Look. You don't know them like me and Ruby do: they're good people and way more forgiving than you'd think. In fact, they even felt bad when they thought you got exploded back there.”

Then she turned Blake around to face her. “Hey, we're going over there this evening so I can show off the stuff I got for Ruby to use on the team. Why don't you come with us? I promise I won't let Pyrrha punch your lights out. And if Jaune does it, you won't even feel it anyway.”

Blake sighed. “I guess I should at least apologize in person and face whatever consequences come of it. But like I said, I won't be able to be on the team at least until the anti-discrimination rally in Vale this week: SHIELD suspects the White Fang will make an appearance at some point. Adam can't stand people working toward a peaceful coexistence.”

“Neither do a lot of other people, apparently.” Yang chuckled, “Humanity First is planning something too: that's going to be our first mission!”

Blake felt herself smile despite herself. “Now you're making me really wish I could get involved.”

Yang shot her a gigantic grin. “Maybe you can. I mean we're all supposed to hide our identities after all: we just have to get you a gimmick.”

“A gimmick?”

“Oh yeah. You won't believe what Ruby came up with.”

Jaune had seen Pyrrha sleeping many times before. One the couch after her endurance was outpaced by a movie marathon, on trips to the other kingdoms, in the lab during particularly long days... He'd even woken up to her leaning against him, deep in slumber more than once.

That morning was... different. For one, he'd learned something new about his girlfriend: like the mighty noble gas oxygen, a sleeping Pyrrha Nikos in bed seemed to expand to fill her container. Which is to say that sometime in the night, she'd sprawled across the entire king-sized bed, which included lying partially across him. Her upper torso was resting atop his left side, her own left arm reached up to clutch the pillow under his head while one long leg was stretched across his thighs. Her head rested on his shoulder where was contentedly and rather adorably chewing on the collar of his pajama top.

Oh, if only he could reach his scroll to get a picture of that. She'd never admit to it without proof. But that was impossible, seeing as her positioning had him completely immobilized.

He didn't know if she was consciously pinning him in place, but he wasn't exactly complaining. In face, he'd brought his left arm up around her to pull her a bit closer. He wasn't going to lie: he could get used to this. Well maybe not the part where they'd both been so self-conscious that they'd bundled up like winter was on its way before climbing into bed: him in a flannel night shirt and track pants, her in one of his old black hoodies with the orange lining and matching sweats.
Somewhere, he was sure Yang was getting the urge to mock and didn't know why or who.

There was work that had to be done, he knew, but he tried to ignore that to the moment.

Too late. His mind was already kicking in, bringing things together and cataloging them. His sisters would be at the compound and he didn't know what to expect. Meanwhile, Humanity First could mobilize at any moment and he didn't even know the first thing about almost half of his team. Dust, he still needed to set Ruby and Yang up with Hematite variants—if that's what they wanted. Then there were Nora and Ren. Would a goddess need powered armor or would it get in the way? What could Ren do anyway besides fire those submachine guns of his?

And if not everyone used the armor, that was going to seriously inhibit their mobility. They'd need transport; one of the things Arc Industries didn't really do.

As if timing itself to the peak of his mounting stress, his scroll beeped. Not that he could answer it given... He looked down in time to lock his blue eyes with green.

Pyrrha came awake with a groggy little mewl and froze as she realized she had his collar in her mouth. Very slowly, as if trying not to agitate a wild animal, she parted her lips and let the fabric fall away. Then she gave him a sleepy smile, trying to ignore the wet spot that was now plastered to her cheek, and said, “Good morning, Jaune,” in her most innocent voice.

He felt himself smirk and felt a little playful. “Good morning. Have a nice midnight snack?”

As he hoped, she turned red and tried to bury her head in the crook of her shoulder. “I have no idea how that happened.” The scroll beeped again and she peeked up again, hopeful at the distraction. “Maybe you should get that.”

“Do I have to?” he slurred with his own sleepiness and gave her a quick squeeze. Then he got a little more bold and leaned down to kiss the top of her head.

She surprised him by craning her neck as soon as he started to draw back and capturing his lips in a quick, clumsy kiss. Reading her successful revenge on the mussy smile on his face, she said, “Yes. It could be important. Maybe it's your sister.”

With as much reluctance as he was feeling, she withdrew her arm and leg and rolled off him, freeing him to grab his scroll.

“One day we're actually not going to have anything to do for the day.” Jaune said ruefully. Without checking the called ID, he opened the scroll. “Jaune Arc.”

“Hey, Jauney. Interesting night last night, huh?” The voice on the other end was pure snake oil and self-amusement.

“Oh Dust damn it.” Jaune muttered. “What do you want, Roman?”

“Oh, not much, buddy. It's just... you know how I got the contract for Vale's aerial surveillance net?” Of course, Jaune did because he was certain Roman took payola to make certain tapes disappear before they got to the police. Roman didn't wait for him to reply though, “As it turns out, I picked up something really impressive at the docks last night. You and your Hunter pals dealing with that freak that attacked the Ball.”

For a moment, Jaune was confused. Why did Torchwick sound so amused like he had the upper hand at something. News footage of his friends defeating the Juggernaut would be a win for Jaune, not Torchwick. That is, if SHIELD allowed it to get out.
“Okay.”

“Want to see the best clip?” Torchwick asked, sounding downright sadistic. The scroll chirped, indicating the clip was being sent. Jaune played it, finding a bird's eye view of Cardin as the Juggernaut charging at Jaune just as Jaune tripped and fell. Cardin struck with an overhand blow, landing it squarely on the raise Arc Family Shield.

And then the shield flared with golden light and an explosion of force rebounded from its surface, blowing an arc-shaped crater in the ground and launching Cardin into it.

Jaune goggled. That's what happened? The shield... protected him? Reflected the attack? He had no idea. Vaguely, he recalled his grandfather once telling him that the sword component of Crocea Mors meant nothing but status, that it had been reforged and replaced many times in the history of the Arcs. But the scabbard? The scabbard had been modified, but never replaced because that was the real treasure of the family.

“Whoa.” he muttered.

“Hmm?” Pyrrha asked, having almost but not quite drifted back to sleep.

“Whoa indeed,” Torchwick said, “Looks like somebody has a Semblance. Not big news for anyone else, but for the guy who is driving Hunters to near extinction? Well tongues might start wagging, people might start rumors, accusations might fly...”

Suddenly it all became very clear to Jaune. “Ohhh, you're blackmailing me.”

“Please: blackmail is such an ugly word. I prefer extortion. The 'X' makes it sound more serious, don't you think?”

Jaune groaned. How had Roman and Yang never hooked up? “Look, Roman, the truth is, I couldn't care less what the press says about me at this point. My reputation can't possibly get worse, so I figure if you release this, it might actually loop around and I'll become a media darling.” Before Torchwick could argue, he continued, “But if you really want me to throw lien at you, I am in the market for a new plane—delivered on the down low. I'm sure you're familiar with that kind of arrangement?”

There was a pause as Torchwick's brain switched gears, then: “Oh really? The pure, white knight needs something from the bad, bad Torchwick? And in secret? What, are you trying to be some kind of comic book superhero?”

“You know what? Yes, Roman. I am going to use the plane to zip from kingdom to kingdom using the powers I've concealed from the world to save the day. And Pyrrha is my sidekick. Happy now?”

The former criminal snorted. “Fine, Jaune, whatever you're really doing, that mental image was worth is. I can have whatever you're looking for delivered discreetly whenever and wherever. Just send me the specs of what you want and where you want it. I'm guessing you still have the lien to pay for it.”

“Great. Thanks, Roman.” Jaune closed the scroll before Torchwick could start anything else. As soon as he did, he was smacked down onto the bed by a pillow.

“I am not your sidekick.” Pyrrha muttered, half-smiling.
Yes, I know this chapter was slow, but it does put some important stuff into place I needed to set up before we get into the Humanity First mission. Plus, people wanted more Blake.

Also, I love writing Torchwick. I didn't expect to, but he's so wonderfully sleazy.

So apparently, several people guessed the shield thing early and compared it to Fate Stay Night. So I went and actually watched Fate Stay Night and wow, the servant/master set-up is very similar to my Rune Breaker except FSN has a very specific line that mentions the grail stops the personality conflict that's the core of RB from happening in that universe. I was amused.

But seriously, I hadn't seen FSN until someone pointed it out to me. That is literally what the scabbard does in the original legend. And yes, in some traditions, Crocea Mors, sword of Alexander the Great, eventually became either Caliburn, the Sword in the Stone, or Excalibur, the sword from the Lady of the Lake. Why Jaune has that and not like... Almace or Durendal, which were actual legendary French swords? Because a lot of people had to go look those up, I'm guessing :p

By the way, it recently occurred to me that Ozpin is ALL the father-gods from mythology. Served by two black birds? Odin Check. (also, if that staff doesn't turn into a spear, I'll eat my hat) Constantly drinks a concoction possibly to keep his divinity and has lightning bolt glasses? Zeus-check. Resides in a continual source of light that is eventually destroyed by a dragon? 'Sup, Ra? Dangerously incompetent because he thinks he knows better than everyone? Well... that's all those guys. This also makes either Salem or Goodwitch Hera, which is fun.

Anyway, next chapter will be more fun with Blanche and Gris showing up plus the debut of Ruby's alter ego. It'll be spectacular, sensational. Amazing even. And if you think that's a clue, boy will your face be red....
“Welcome home.” Glynda's voice greeted Jaune and Pyrrha as they climbed out of the rented car they'd returned to the Compound in. “Mr. Arc, your sisters and guests arrived fifteen minutes ago. They've made themselves comfortable in the living room.”

“Thank you, Glynda.” Jaune replied, pausing to lean on the car and take a deep breath.

A warm arm snaked around his shoulders and gave him a half-hug. “Why are you still nervous?” Pyrrha asked. “You already talked to Blanche last night and she doesn't seem particularly upset with you.”

He leaned into the hug, but still shook his head. “That's Blanche though. Now Gris is here and... I'm pretty sure she's the one that probably took my leaving the worst. I was like her hero or something back then. And Blanche was right last night: I never called, I never wrote—I never even said goodbye, and I wasn't there when...” he heaved a heavy sigh. “I can't delay this any longer. Let's... let's just get up there.”

Pyrrha started to say something encouraging, but honestly, she didn't know enough to be sure she wouldn't be opening old wounds. She didn't even have siblings, so it was a situation she was unfamiliar with. One thing that occurred to her was that she should probably try again to contact her mother. She'd tried the day after the press conference, but she'd been off on a mission. It was always a mission.

Letting loose a little sigh of her own, she followed Jaune up the stairs to the main living area.

They emerged from the stairwell to find Blanche sitting primly on the couch with a glass of water. Next to her, maintaining a good three feet of space between them an looking supremely nervous was a young man with shaggy, black hair, dressed in a light blue button down shirt under a royal purple vest with piping the matched the shirt, and punjabi pants of a lighter shade of purple than the vest. A black cloak with a royal purple silk lining was folded neatly on the couch next to him with a sheathed arming sword resting atop it. There was a crest on the sword bearing a sigil that appeared to be a domino mask bisected by a dagger.

It wasn't until they were completely in the room that they had a view of the mantle and the third person in the room who stood there with one hand resting on the plaque set before the empty stand where Crocea Mors was normally sat.

She had the same thick hair Blanche and Jaune shared, but hers was ash blonde, almost gray instead of the vibrant yellow-blonde of her siblings. In this case, it was cut very short in the sides and back while being allowed to still fall in a heavy fringe in front. She wore a long, wool coat, charcoal gray with black black leather straps for fasteners, all left open. Beneath it, she wore a black silk blouse and three white leather belts. Two of those were made of corded leather and existed solely to suspend a golden buckle beating the Arc family sigil. The third was a wide band from which a broad-bladed short sword hung. Its scabbard was white with a gray enamel inlay, the hilt silver with a silver pommel in the shape of a queen chess piece. Mottled gray cargo pants and black combat boots completed the look—the look of the traditional distinctive and garish Hunter's ensemble.
She turned from her short vigil at the mantle and seemed to stare through both newcomers even though her eyes were obscured by a pair of round, dark glasses.

Her lips twitched and she was about to speak when the young man on the couch leapt up. “M-ister Arc! It’s a... a pleasure to meet you. Exciting to meet you even!” The act of standing had revealed a three foot raccoon tail that twitched behind him, in time with his nerves.

“Um...” Jaune started, having clearly not expected this.

A light breeze swirled in the room and the girl at the mantle, obviously Gris, let out an exaggerated groan without turning to look at him. “Weren't you the one that begged me not to embarrass you today, Rey?” She crossed the room and placed herself between the raccoon faunus and her brother, plastering on a stage smile. “You're going to have to excuse him. He's a fanboy; been trying the past two years to get me to introduce him to you.” The smile faded. “Of course, I had to tell him you didn't want anything to do with the family anymore.”

“Gris...” Jaune started. Blanche echoed him, moving to stand up.

“Save it.” she cut them off, straightening up and folding her arms. “I get it, Jaune. Of all the rest of the family? I actually get it. You're the one that read me all the old stories and filled my head with how amazing being a hero was going to be, remember?”

She turned her head way as she continued and the phantom breeze in the room died completely. “Dad lied to you. He gave you his word and he lied. Arcs always keep their word an he didn't. If I'd really understood what happened back then, I'd have left too. I. Get. That.”

In a few long strides, she closed the distance between herself and Jaune. The air in the room started moving again and she jammed her index finger in his chest hard enough that he almost fell over. “But you broke your word too! You remember that? You said that as my big brother, you'd always be there for me. Well where the hell have you been the last ten years!”

At that, she pushed him, sending him flying hard against the wall. “Jaune!” Pyrrha moved to block any further attacks while checking to see how much damage had been done.

At the same time, the dark-haired boy and Blanche both threw themselves at Gris. The boy got to her first, grabbing her arm. “Gris! Whoa, get a hold of yourself!”

Blanche got her other arm and they both held her back. “I thought we talked about this. I know you're angry, but this isn't the way to go about it.”

Gris made only a token effort to fight them, breathing hard through her nose. Her attention was still fully on her brother. “You think a few stupid gifts were going to make up for not being there? And cards? You sent me cards? What were you thinking? Were you thinking? Do you even know anything about me beyond the nine-year old kid who was up all night that night waiting for you and Dad to get back from Vale?!”

The still unidentified young man hanging on to Gris's arm paused and gaped at Jaune in shock. “You sent her cards? Dude... just no.”

At this point, Pyrrha was utterly lost and looked to Jaune for an explanation. “Why would...”

Feeling four sets of eyes boring into him, Jaune felt the last of his inner strength give in and slid down the wall into a sitting position. “She's blind.” He murmured.
“E-excuse me?” Pyrrha glanced at Gris. She had just seen the girl identify her brother from across the room, then navigate it without issue, right? Plus, hadn't she been reading the Arc family credo when they came in?

“She's blind.” Jaune repeated himself. “Since her first year at Signal.”

Gris shook off her sister and partner's restraining hands and regarded Jaune for a long moment. “So you did know then?”

“Just because I didn't want to risk running into Dad doesn't mean I didn't keep tabs on all of you. You ever wonder why you never had to pay for any of the incredible amounts of property damage you and your team racked up last year? It's because Arc Industries picked up the tab.”

Rocking back on her heels, Gris tilted her head back. “What.”

“I've got to agree.” the raccoon faunus chimed in, laying a hand on Gris's shoulder. “That just raises even more questions. Like the cards.”

“I figured she'd be more upset not getting one when everyone else did. Besides, they had recording in them.”

At this point, Pyrrha just had to raise her hand. “I'm sorry, but... when they say you're blind...”

Gris collected herself enough to smirk. It had been a while since she'd talked to someone who either didn't notice she was blind or didn't know the whole story. Plus, while she hadn't planned to blow up at Jaune, she had been looking forward to meeting Pyrrha Nikos as much as her partner had been to meeting her brother. She was more than happy to use the distraction to try and back out of what she'd just done.

“I'm guessing you've got a lot of questions, huh?”

“Yes, actually, and I'm trying to find a way to ask them without being incredibly rude.”

Gris reached up and ran long fingers through her hair. “Where to start? Well first, you know how they unlock your aura the first week of combat school?” Pyrrha nodded, even though her mother had unlocked hers a good year before she started formal schooling. “Yeah, well mine wasn't unlocked by the middle of the first semester. Nothing they did stressed me enough or scared me enough to make it unlocked. The other kids had already started calling me The Girl Without Fear. Not quite as catchy as Invincible Girl, but it has a ring to it.

“Anyway, we were doing Introductory to Dust combination. You know that experiment where you mix Burn and Shock to make a long-term lantern? It's kind of routine if you've got your aura to ignite them, but if you don't, it's kind of difficult. I tried to use the Bunsen burner. It worked... sort of. But the flash scarred my retinas.

“Woke up my aura too, but aura can't fix what's already sort of healed. Luckily,” she held up a hand and a steady wind kicked up in the room, whipping everyone's clothes around and knocking various knicknacks off their shelves. “I got this. And I'm really good at it. How good you might ask?”

The raccoon faunus slapped a hand over his eyes. “Oh boy, here comes the gloat.”

“Well after a year learning how to 'see' with the vibrations in the air, I kicked ass in my last two Vale Regional tourneys, got into Beacon, became leader of Team GRAY—with the most dramatic, but adorable partner ever—and last year, I took first in the Vytal tournament.” She leaned forward
conspiratorially. “Actually, I'm kind of chasing your record. I mean, I couldn't be a four-time regional winner because I, well, exploded, but you only won two Vytal tournaments, right?”

“Did you just call me adorable?”

Pyrrha made a dismissive gesture. “Well yes. The competition at the Vytal tournament is very fierce, not just physically, but mentally as well.” It wasn't pride that caused her to chalk up her two Vytal losses to psychological warfare. Her opponent had practically destroyed her the first time before a single blow was struck.

“That's one perk to having wind control: I can shut out all the smack talk.”

“And she's so incredibly modest.” her partner chimed in. “Hey Gris? Still haven't introduced me.”

She had the decency to give a nervous cough. “Oh. Sorry.” She grabbed him about the shoulders and pulled him into position in front of her. “Pyrrha Nikos, Jaune Arc, may I present the greatest partner in the history of Hunters having partners, Reynard Clearwater III. I just call him Rey.”

Finding himself presented to a pair of his bonafide heroes, Rey froze up. “Um... pleased to meet you?”

“Hello.” Pyrrha said, almost automatically. Then she looked from Gris to Jaune on the floor. “Maybe we should give these two some time to talk. Blanche, Reynard, have you had lunch yet? Let's got in the kitchen and find something to eat.”

“That sounds like a great idea.” Blanche said, shooting a warning glance at both her siblings that said she expected both of them to be alive when she returned.

Rey eased himself out of Gris's grip and turned to her. “You gonna be okay?”

She nodded and offered him a quick smile. “I promise I won't beat up your idol anymore, okay?”

“Just... let you know if you need me.” he said before following the others out into the hall between living room and kitchen.

Just as they left, however, Glynda chimed in. “Arrival: Ruby Rose, Yang Xiao Long and an unidentified guest. Override Rose001 Accepted.”

“I knew I shouldn't have given her an override.” Jaune said, looking up at Gris, who hadn't moved from where she was.

“I'll take care of it!” Pyrrha called from the hall just as the doorbell rang.

Her intention when she opened the door was to tell the girls that Jaune had visitors and ask them to come back later. Whatever more detail they might want, that was all they were getting from her: it's was Jaune's responsibility to tell them about his family issues if he so chose.

That plan didn't make first contact with the open door.

A pair of braided metal cables shot by her on either side, anchoring on the wall behind her by what looked to be extremely high-tech suction cups. She only had a split second to drop down into a combat crouch, one leg extended out, the rest of her weight centered on one hand an a bent knee, as Ruby Rose came flying in, pulled by the rapidly retracting cables.

“Hey Pyrrha, check out what Yang gave me! I'm going to be the best superhero ever!” Much to
Pyrrha's shock, Ruby didn't hit the wall and bounce off. No, she hit the wall and stuck via a pair of gauntlets with blue-glowing fingertips and palms and matching boots with similar soles.

Kicking off the wall, she landed on the ceiling, clinging like some big, demented bug (with a red cape). “I've even got an amazing name for my super-self! Are you ready for this? The Scarlet Spider —er... you have company. Who probably totally shouldn't have heard that.” She dropped to the floor and glared back out the door. “Dang it, Yang!”

“How was I supposed to know?” the blonde brawler complained as she entered. “Besides, that was a kick ass entrance.”

A third figure stopped at the door, hesitating as they watched Pyrrha recover from her friendly neighborhood ambush. They were dressed for a funeral: a long black dress, wide-brimmed hat, gloves and a veil. Pyrrha regarded them cautiously, already making an educated guess given who Yang and Ruby would trust with their team plans.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

The woman at the door remained where she was. “I'm not sure if I'm welcome.”

Pyrrha steeled herself. Though trained from a young age by her father in the art of diplomacy and manners, forgiveness was actually not a lesson she'd learned well in her upbringing. Her mother in particular was more than happy to encourage grudges because they inspired her to strive to meet and exceed the targets of them.

All the same, she trusted Ruby and Yang as if they were her own sisters and was willing to at least hear their friend out.

“If you're who I think you are, I think we can at least have a civil discussion, even if this isn't really the best time.”

Whatever Blake was going to say was cut off by another voice from the living room door. Gris and Jaune were there, the former exclaiming. “What in the name of Dust is going on here?!?”

“You missed the most awesome thing ever!” Rey reported.

“Hey, you're Jaune's sister, right?” Yang said, coming up the Blanche. “We didn't get to talk last night. The name's Yang.”

It didn't take long before everyone was talking at once and Jaune miraculously found himself safely out of the center of attention for once as introductions were made and Ruby desperately tried to explain away her entrance and new gear.

The events of the day were already weighing heavily on him. Gris was right: he'd broken his word to her just as surely as their father had to him. He'd be a hypocrite to expect her to forgive him over it, though he would by lying if he said he wasn't feeling relieved to have seen her try so hard to move away from her emotional outburst. It made him feel like he could salvage their relationship at least on some level.

His five older sisters were all a decade or better older, which left him, Gris and Vert as their own little group in the family. They'd all shared a special bond, especially him and Gris, as Vert was the baby and always hanging on their mother's skirt.

While he pondered how to fix things, he noticed one more guest at the Compound that he hadn't been expecting. It wasn't hard to guess that the disguise (by Ruby no doubt) woman was Blake
Belladonna. As much as he wanted to extend and olive branch, he was so not ready to have that woman in his house right now. He was about to make his way over to Yang to try and explain just that when someone poked him in the shoulder.

To his surprise, it was Gris. His sister, inclined his head toward Ruby, who was stammering her way through another explanation as to why she would call herself a superhero. “Your friend’s heart is beating a mile a minute trying to come up with good lies. You should probably go save her.”

“Gris...” Jaune started.

“Later. If you really want to start making things up to me, let’s here what’s really going on here.”

Chapter End Notes

So here we have Gris. Again, if there was anything canon to go off of for Jaune's sisters, I would have used them, but they didn't so OC. And also Daredevil. As you can tell, she's a lot more conflicted about things than Blanche. The idea that she would be chasing Pyrrha's record came really early in developing this fic. I knew I was going to have some Arc sisters and that usually the Arcs are presented as really Idyllic and in Arkos especially, immediately accepting of Pyrrha. I'm more of an Earn Your happy Ending kind of guy, so I knew at least one sister would be a pain in Pyrrha's ass.

Of course they're going to spar eventually. That's the promise of the premise.

People are going to be either mad or delighted with the implication as to who beat Pyrrha in the Vytal tournament. For all my problems with Vol 3 above and beyond those last four episodes (I did a blog about it, Google “descendantsserial and cache”), I will say that Neon Katt and Flynt Coal are actually brutally effective in psychological warfare. If Yang weren't... Yang... they probably could have gone all the way. As I've written her time in Beacon in this AU? Katt probably straight up traumatized Pyrrha.

I'm not sure how or why, but Rey came out as way more... Jaune... than I intended. My original personality for him was Beast Boy.

We also have a bit more of the puzzle as to what Papa Arc did. Hint: it's one of the points of divergence in this fic.

Originally, this chapter started with meeting Blake, but without him getting emotionally suckerpunched, he just came off as mean still holding a grudge against her. Now it's more that he's just plain not in the mood to deal with the emotions seeing her dredges up.

And the last thing I know people will want to talk about: Ruby's reveal as the Scarlet Spider. What can I say? Ben was always the better Spider-man. This actually took a lot of thought. Originally, it was going to be Quicksilver and she was going to get a suit that enhanced her speed, but I figured that's too close to Ruby's just normal powers when everyone else gets something that builds off their core powers—and yes, that's been my rule all along: everyone gets a Marvel power-up that builds on their original flavor character. Pyrrha gets plasma, which is an oft-forgotten Thing Magnets Can Do, Yang gets size added to her toughness, Nora gets stormcalling on top of electricity, Ruby gets higher mobility on top of her speed.
We'll get into the exact gear she's got, plus add a piece next chapter, but there you go: Spider-Ruby.

Remember that sequel I have planned, Noose of Glass? One of the arcs is called Clone Saga.

And on that note, coming up Jaune comes clean to his sisters as to what he's doing and introduces Ruby and Yang to the specialized equipment he's designed for them. Jaune has a talk with Blake while Gris explains things to Pyrrha.
“First point of order for our very first team meeting is going to be a very detailed and exhaustive reading of the definition of the term ‘secret identity’.” Jaune said firmly.

“Not even in the privacy of your own home? How was I supposed to know you had people over?” Ruby whined. “How often does that even happen?”

Jaune gave her a deadpan look that would have made Blake proud if she knew him better. “Ow. My social inadequacies,” he said blandly. “Also, there are people here all the time: Velvet, maybe it's not so bad if she found out, but Cinder—Cinder is usually her checking up on me at least once a week. Now that would be a disaster.

“Come to think of it... she's been rather hands-off since that time she threatened you after the press conference,” Pyrrha recalled.

“Probably making lopsided deals with my company.” Jaune groused, “Did you know she tried to black box the network protocols we sold to the Atlasian fleet protecting Vale? What is that even about?”

Blanche folded her arms. “I think that's a question we're all asking—though some of us aren't asking them of whoever 'Cinder' is.”

“My business partner.” Jaune said dismissively. “She got a look at some of my patents while I was working for Advanced Idea Mechanics and offered to finance my own venture. My idea, her money and business savvy.”

Rey looked back at the billion dollar private lab they'd walked through to arrive at the 'wardrobe' they were standing in now. “Well that worked out.”

“Oh you ain't seen nothing yet, kid.” Yang gave him a cheeky grin and a wink before pointing at her fellow blond. “Jaune! Do the thing!”

He glared at her a moment before glancing up into the empty air. “Glynda? Display mode all current operational models.”

There was a hum and racks began to descend from the ceiling or or rise from the floor. Glynda helpfully threw up a holographic legend over each one: Mark 2 Hematite [upgrade v0.05], Mark 2 Scarab, Mark 3 Hematite, Mark 3 Hematite [Variant: Super Mobility]. Mark 3 Hematite [Variant: Light Armor]

Rey practically drooled. “Oh my Dust, are these powered armor? Actual powered armor and not mecha like Paladins?”

“Um... yeah,” Jaune said, unused to having a fan.

“That. Is. So. COOL!”

Gris reached out and tugged hard on his coat. “Down boy.”
“But Gris, do you know how many firms had tried to build something like this? How much cutting-edge tech had to go into each of these?” He took a step toward the Scarab. “What a Hunter could do with one of these?”

“Actually, we kind of do.” Jaune cut in with a nervous chuckle. “The Mark 1 was how Pyrrha and I escaped the White Fang in Vacuo. That's... why I have my aura unlocked. Pyrrha unlocked it for me so I didn't... die.” Both he and Pyrrha missed the arched eyebrow this got from Blanche and the just plain shocked expression it earned from Rey.

“It cost the life of a very brave man in the process.” Pyrrha added.

Jaune nodded and to everyone's surprise, so did Blake. The cat faunus noticed the looks this got and shrank away from everyone, especially the Arc sisters. “I was there too. How and why I'm not at liberty to discuss no matter how much Ruby let's slip.”

The youngest Patch sister had the decency to bow her head in shame.

“Dr. Yinsen was a good man,” Blake continued, “I'm sorry I couldn't help save him.”

A brief silence settled in before Jaune collected himself. “W-when we got back, we hit on the idea of using the powered armor design to fight Grimm and any other threat that requires a Hunter- level response. An elite Hunter team with their abilities augmented by the armor. Thanks to our continued and completely laughable ability to keep secrets, that team's gone from me and Pyrrha to include Yang, Ruby and two others.”

“And Blake.” Yang added.

“I...” Jaune started.

“And. Blake.” Yang cracked her knuckles.

Erring on the side of caution, Jaune just nodded. “Yeah, so that's the story. The other thing I've been busy with on top of trying to advance faunus rights, topple the White Fang, playing economic chicken with the most powerful man in Atlas, reuniting with my estranged family, and starting a relationship with my assistant who is also my best friend—have I mentioned this has been a big month for me?”

Gris opened her mouth, her expression promising a biting comment, but then she shut it and lowered her head. “Okay, I'm impressed.” That was said with a hint of irreverence, but when she continued, her tone was far more subdued. “I've got to admit I was honestly half-convinced you ditched me... us to go be this millionaire asshole with a kinky sex life like the tabloids say. That what dad did was just some excuse.”

She nodded toward their sister. “When Blanche said it wasn't like that, I thought she was just so desperate to get the family back together, shed buy anything you said.” Some of her fire returned and she stood up more straight, causing Rey, who had been moving to comfort her to jump back. “But if you're really doing all this, I guess you really are still an Arc after all.”

“You thought I wasn't even part of the family?”

“Can you give me any proof from the last ten or so years that you were?” Jaune winced at the cold, brutal truth of the statement. Gris didn't let up. “Mom cries on your birthday. Like you were dead or something. Dad, he stopped hunting altogether—as if giving up something he loved was penance for pissing your moody ass off when he thought he was helping you fulfill your dream. And Vert's gone into this Goth phase I'm sure is your fault somehow on top of... other things.
Everyone else but Blanche is mostly out of the house now, but we all feel it, Jaune. This isn't something we're going to hug out right here and now.”

She gestured at the armors. “I'm happy you're doing good, but that's not going to be enough.” Folding her arms, she let out a sigh and, without turning, reached out and grabbed Rey's shoulder, keeping him from fidgeting about. “But for now, I'd be a terrible partner if I didn't let my partner geek out a little.”

“Wait. Shouldn't you guys talk...” Rey started, but with a bit more strength than she really needed to, Gris dragged him in front of her and turned him to face Jaune.

“Not today, thank you,” she said, giving him a pat on the bat. “Watch, drool. He's got to business with his team to take care of anyway.”

“Then what are you going to do?”

Her unseeing gaze then swept those assembled and a predator grin crossed her face. “Well let's see: we've got the Red Reaper, Solar Dragon, Shadow Skill and Invincible Girl here and there's a big, open space I noticed off from the lab. Anyone up for a spar? Me and Durendal haven't had a challenge in a while.” She patted the pommel of her weapon fondly.

“What about Marigold Thrush?” Rey asked, earning him a glare.

“We do not talk about her outside of school.” Gris's teeth ground together as she started to head out of the wardrobe room. “Anyone coming?”

Blake gave Jaune a quick glance, catching his eye for just a second before saying, “You know, I get the feeling things will go more smoothly here without me. I'll spar with you. Just don't call me Shadow Skill. I don't even know where that came from.”

The others were quiet until the pair had left nominal earshot.

“She... needs time,” Blanche informed Jaune, ever the diplomat.

“Probably not my place, sir, but she's been upset with you a long, long time. When she first saw that I was... a fan... she told me she regretted partnering with me and didn't speak to me for a few days.” Rey frowned a little and looked toward the door where Gris had disappeared.

Jaune followed his gaze and let out a low groan. “She's... not wrong. I don't deserve to be forgiven until I actually do something to address the problem.” He gave Blanche a searching look. “What did she mean about Vert dealing with 'other things'?”

The eldest of the Arc children took a long moment to pick out the best response. “That is...”

**RWBY**

Far way, in the Arc ancestral home, Vert Arc peered cautiously through the arch separating the the family room from the main hall of the house's first floor. She was tall and lanky like her brother, with thick blonde hair down to the middle of her back the color of straw. Curious blue eyes darted about as her ears strained to pick up the sounds of anyone else moving about the second floor.

Not hearing either her mother or father, she crept back over to the couch and more specifically the bowl and paper packet sitting on the mahogany coffee table in front of her. Plopping down on the couch, she picked up the packet and tore it open with her teeth. The contents tinkled into the bowl in a gold-orange flood.
Vert took one more look around before turning her attention to her gloves. Made of thin, supple fabric to allow her as much tactile sensation as possible, they didn't really go with the black and green striped turtleneck and black, wide-legged jeans she wore, mostly thanks to the bright green and blue Dust patterns infused into them to keep her... Semblance? Everyone called it that, but Semblances usually came after Aura, so Vert wasn't convinced... in check.

She pulled one off and, careful to not touch the sides of the bowl with her bare fingertips, she reached in and touched one of the unpopped kernels. Crackling yellow energy formed around her finger before surging into the touched kernel. At the same time, her bright blue eyes flashed to red with the scalera turning midnight black.

As quickly as she could she leaned back just as the piece of popcorn exploded, setting off a chain reaction that popped the entire bowl.

A triumphant smile spread across her face and, without thinking, she picked up the bowl to enjoy the bounty of her efforts. Yellow energy crackled across the bowl, surrounding it.

“Eep.” she said, throwing the bowl while leaping over the back of the couch.

There was a small explosion, followed by the smell of burning popcorn as a blonde head peaked over the couch, looking nervously around.

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“...complicated. Also a matter I'd rather not discuss with strangers around.” Blanche looked to the others assembled and added, “No offense.”

“None taken!” Yang said cheerfully. “After all, you've seen how Ruby here can't keep a secret.”

Ruby lifted her chin with a sniff, a gesture she obviously picked up from Weiss. “I can too! I never told anyone about how you didn't stop wetting the bed until a few months after I did.”

“That's not even true!” Yang accused.

“Sure it's not Yang.” Ruby smirked. “Suuure it's not.”

The Patch sisters then descended into a glare stand-off.

Mercifully, Pyrrha interrupted, gently pushing them apart. “In the meantime, I suppose this is a good time to go over your armors, right Jaune?”

Shooting a thankful look to her for the distraction, Jaune gave a resolute nod. “I had no idea what Yang meant when she said she had gear for you, Ruby, but I did assemble a Hematite variant for you based on letting you use your speed: the Mark 3 Hematite Super-Mobility Variant. It's got a lighter artificial muscle frame to give you better range of motion while still multiplying your strength about about six times. Instead of armor plates, you just have micro-chainmail. I was still weighting what kind of weapons to give you, but it looks like you've got that covered as soon as I can integrate the gear Yang gave you.” He looked to the older sister. “What exactly did you give her?”

Yang smirked. “You mean you don't know? Oh, Jaune-y, you need to keep your eye on the competition. Over in Mistral, the Divine Warrior Corporation has gone whole-hog into making stuff for the Reclaimers: The boots and gloves let you stick to pretty much anything with... something about static electricity or something, The cable launchers do the same thing using Dust-reinforced cables and rapid ascenders, and they also made a super-strong spray adhesive of field
repairs—but us Reclaimers discovered if you jimmy the spray nozzle a little bit? You can do some pretty neat tricks. Wanna show ’em, sis?”

She completely missed the mischievous grin on her sister's face. “Sure thing, Yang!” Ruby flipped her wrist, revealing a set of jury-rigged controls on the heel of her palm and a spray nozzle situated at her wrist. Pressing down on the controls with her middle and ring fingers, she launched a sticky net made of adhesive, catching Yang off guard as well as... catching Yang.

“Hey—gah! Ruby!” Yang strained at the entangling mass, which stretched but didn't break.

Looking far too satisfied with herself, Ruby grinned and waved her hands at her trapped sister like a spokesmodel. “As you can see, this stuff is pretty darn strong. It gives Ursas trouble breaking out. And if that wasn't cool enough, with another little adjustment...” She fiddled with the nozzle, “I can do this.”

Another flick of her wrist fired a compact wad of the stuff, which smacked Yang right between the eyes, knocking her over.

“Packs quite a punch, huh?” Ruby grinned as a pillar of flame erupted behind her. Sensing it, her grin faded. “Only problem is, it's not fire proof.”

“Ruby!” Yang stalked forward, only held back by Pyrrha, who grabbed her arms.

“You know she's only doing this to get to you Yang.”

“Well MISSION ACCOMPLISHED!” Yang dragged Pyrrha behind her as she stalked toward her sister. “Time to claim your prize, Rubes.”

Her menacing approach was blocked by Jaune. “Actually, Yang, I've got a question for you.”

“What?” she ground out, eyes burning red. The fact that she had an audience in the form of Blanche and Rey was completely forgotten.

“You belt.” Jaune said, pointing at it. “You can grow, but I noticed there's symbols on it to go smaller. Can you go smaller?”

As annoyed as she was with Ruby, Yang couldn't pass up a chance to show off. “Can I? Check this out!” She shrugged her arms out of Pyrrha's grasp as the other woman loosened it, and turned the dial on her belt in the 'small' direction. The same wash of colored particles they'd all seen the night before engulfed her, but instead of expanding, they compressed until they were no larger than someone's thumb before vanishing to reveal a tiny Yang.

She threw out her arms in a 'ta-da' motion before marching past Jaune and, before her little sister could tell what was going on, grabbed her show and lifted, toppling Ruby over on her back.

In a flash of more particles, Yang returned to normal size, sticking her tongue out at her fallen foe. “I'm just as strong as I am at normal size when tiny. How awesome is that?”

It was an effort to keep from cracking up at that, but Jaune managed it. “Cool, because I have something you might be interested in.” He took out his scroll and used it to access the holographic projectors in the room. A panel appeared featuring what appeared to be a robotic damsel fly.

“While our friends at Divine Warrior are working to help the Reclaimers, Arc Industries is looking toward what comes next: expansion, including larger farms. One of the tools for that is this: the Arc Pollenator. I'll skip the other specs, but what's important to you is that the flight system can
move up to fifty miles an hour. I was worried about what might happen to a set of repulsers when they got shrank, so my idea was to attach one of these to your version of the Hematite armor so when you shrink, you can use the wings to get around.”

“Sweet.” Yang said, already imagining herself flying around punching people in the face at tiny size. “Gives new meaning to ‘float like a butterfly, sting like a bee’. What about weapons? People would recognize the Ember Celica.”

It was Pyrrha that answered this time, moving over to the rack the Mark 3 Hematite Light Armor variant was resting on and retrieving something that looked like a pair of short, curved blades attached to each other by a stubby cross handle and a black cylinder that looked like an aerosol can. “I actually have you covered on that: I was playing around with Hanashite's plasma cannon mode in the autoCAD and came up with this: it's a high-voltage taser that can fire a discharge up to about thirty feet.”

Pulling a thumb trigger, she cause the blades to light up with a yellowish arc of electricity. Then she shut it off and handed it to Yang. “I made two since that's more your fighting style.”

Yang pulled the trigger, lightning dancing in her eyes. Then she depressed it all the way, sending a bolt of energy lancing up into the ceiling in a brilliant flash. This only made her look more delighted. “Oh yeah, this is gonna be quite a sting for.... The Bumble Bee!”

Ruby kipped up to standing. “You can't call yourself that! You named your bike that! Everyone will know!”

“Especially when you tell them.” Yang teased, then sighed dramatically. “But you're right... keeping with the bug theme you and I have going...”

“Aren't spiders arachnids?” Rey offered only to get a glare from both sisters. “... shutting up now.”

Yang nodded in approval of his fast learning. “How about... Th Wasp?”

“Works for me!” Ruby beamed. Then she turned to her fellow redhead. “Hey Pyrrha, why don't you change your name so we can all be bugs?”

Pyrrha returned her smile, but rolled her eyes in Jaune's direction. “I think that would be a grand idea, but Jaune doesn't plan to use the Scarab anymore.”

“What?” Ruby looked at him, shocked. “Jaune, that thing is awesome! How can you not want to use it?”

“Because it's too slow, Rubes. I'm sure you can appreciate that.” While the younger woman nodded, he worked his scroll again and brought up a schematic. “At Sienna Crossroads, Pyrrha almost got hurt because I couldn't get there to support fast enough. Hopefully our favorite human supremacist group will stay stay put long enough for me to finalize the design on this”

The image showed a design that was leaner in frame than the Scarab, with a gold and blue paint job. Its face was a golden mask, and from the rear view, not one but two arc reactors could be seen situated at the shoulder blades. These were concealed by what appeared to be a voluminous, blue cape that the schematic labeled as a cooling system. Most notable were a set out out-sized hands and forearms with a triple-array of repulsers mounted over the knuckles, and equally out-sized calves and feet housing some sort of air cushion mechanism.

Chapter End Notes

And then all the things happened in this one.

I'm very interested in how people respond to Gris and her conflict with Jaune. It would be very easy for her to forgive him without him really having to do something directly for her to make up for what happened from a narrative standpoint, but I feel like a hurt like that, as Gris says, can't be hugged out.

It's a fine balancing act writing Gris. I'm always hesitant to write OC's in fan fiction because for me at least, that's not why I'm reading. This goes doubly so for Gris because I want her to be teenaged and abrasive, but also have a point.

The scene with Vert, that's just some set-up for the thing people have been wanting me to do. If you liked it, you'll get to check that out later, if you didn't you can safely ignore it as it won't intersect much with Arc Reaction. But yeah, I'm sure you can guess who Vert is for the purposes of this fusion. My very favorite superhero.

Somehow Yang gets to make all my favorite pop culture references both here and in Game On. Divine Warrior, by the way, is the literal translation of the name Osbourne. So Ruby's loadout as Scarlet Spider comes from none other than the Osbourne Corporation. Or Oscorp. Yes.

I had already conceived of Yang picking the Wasp moniker using the 'float like a butterfly, sting like a bee' line a long time ago. It's either fortunate or unfortunate timing that this chapter comes directly on the heels of the passing of Mohammad Ali. If you've got the time, go read up on the man: he was so much more than a boxer.

I do want to call attention to the fact that Pyrrha built the Stingers for Yang. It'll be very important later in this story to establish that yes, Pyrrha has both the access and the knowledge to design and built armors and weapons off the Arc Industries systems. Also, she didn't have a lot to do this chapter besides attempt to prevent slapstick.

Finally, I'd like to talk about the Sentry.

I hate the Sentry. Or rather, I hate that there is now no chance that character concept will ever be done right. The idea of a superhero who got reconned so hard that the comics themselves ceased to be clawing his way back and trying to reconnect with a universe that doesn't remember he even existed is genius.

But then they gave him the Void because you can't have a Superman analog these days without some dark and edgy BS and ruined him so hard we will never see him again. And anyone trying to use the concept will be dredging up bad memories of the terrible back half of Sentry's existence, so they seriously salted the earth on that solid idea. Good job, Marvel Good job.

So when it came time to name the second of Jaune's Big Dumb overbuilt armors, it was no contest.

And so we now enter the next story arc: The Ambush
Eventually, things wound down. Jaune talked to Blanche while Pyrrha walked Ruby and Yang through the autoCAD to make aesthetic design changes to their armors/costumes.

The two older Arc siblings mostly caught up on the details Jaune had missed in the family's life and on the truth the tabloids ignored about Jaune's. Rey had flitted back and forth between the two groups, wanting to learn more about his partner's family while also wanting to see all the cool, shiny tech stuff.

Near the end, the young man timidly called Jaune aside.

"M-mr. Arc? I kind of feel like I should be made at you—you know, for Gris's sake."

"Yeah, I can understand that." Jaune ducked his head.

"But... there's a lot of things I need to thank you for, sir." Jaune looked up in surprise, but Rey continued on, speaking quickly as if he was worried he'd run out of courage. "First, when you said you paid for... the stuff that happened last year... I know Gris won't say it, but she appreciates it. We'd been wondering why Lucinda and Gris didn't get arrested or something after the thing at the pancake house."

Jaune gave a dismissive wave. "From the police reports, they were defending you and your other teammate. And after knowing a bunch of Huntresses, I can see how a little fight can turn into a lot of property damage when you've got super-strength and Dust flying all over the place."

"Still, you didn't have to, so thank you. The other thing is... well I'm from Menagerie. Not only that, but my parents are farmers. You've seen the city, you know what that means."

Indeed Jaune did. Menagerie was so densely built that the farms were in the outer districts protected by far less effective walls. Before Helios, Grimm incursions into the fields were frequent and fatal. He felt his throat tighten as it occurred to him what it must have been like for Rey growing up. There was an almost nil chance that he hadn't lost someone close to the Grimm given his family's vocation.

Accepting the haunted look in Jaune's eyes as affirmation, he nodded. "Yeah, but it's better now. Much better. The whole region, really." He paused as it thinking things over before reaching down to his belt and removing a capsule from it. "We're expanding like everyone else; reclaimers moving out into the old ruins and such. Last year, a reclamer named Teak Allan found a Dust deposit to the south. It's a big one—with a strange new type of Dust."

He opened the capsule to reveal a metal arrowhead etched and inlaid with a shimmery gray Dust. "He calls it 'vibration dust'. Some of the experts have started calling it vibranium. It absorbs and redirects vibrations and force. If you combine it with a strong metal like titanium here? It's almost indestructible. Teak calls the combination 'adamantium'. Because I'm the first Hunter to get into Beacon since he discovered it, Teak makes sure I get access."

Jaune stared at the arrowhead, mind already racing at possible applications of the stuff. But at the same time, he couldn't help wondering... "Why tell me about it?"
“Because everyone in Menagerie owes you, Mr. Arc,” the raccoon faunus said quietly. “When I saw your press conference, I was pretty sure the SDC wasn't going to budge on their own policies—then your other sister told us about what happened with Schnee... and I thought I could pay you back, for all of us.”

He offered the arrowhead. “Here: take it, study it. If you like what you see, I can get you in touch with Teak at the Wakanda Compound.”

Still awash in all the potential laid out before him, Jaune accepted the arrowhead. “I don't know what to say, Reynard... I've got to repay you somehow—this is too big.”

“You saved my family and my city. I think we can call it even, Mr. Arc.” He paused, frowning. “But if you really want to repay me, make things right with Gris, okay? As much as she kinda hates you right now, she loves you, sir. And I hate what it's doing to her. Sure she's cocky and loud all the time, but seeing her mad like this? That's new and I don't like it.”

“You're a good partner to her, Reynard. I'm glad she's got someone like you looking out for her.” Jaune clapped the younger man on the shoulder. “Don't worry: I don't plan on giving up fixing things between us. I've just got to figure out how.”

Hours later, Jaune found himself staring at a bank of holographic screens trying not to dwell on the fact that he still had no solutions to the Gris situation.

On the up side, the Scarlet Spider and Wasp armors had been fabricated and painted, each now assigned their own rack in the wardrobe. Meanwhile, the Sentry was sitting at forty-percent completion as the rapid fabricators slowed down to attend to the complex design of the cape/heat sink rig.

He had put those windows, along with the satellite view of the Humanity First encampment, off to the side so he could ponder over a security tape from the area he and Pyrrha had marked off as their training room. Gris had lead Blake there earlier for a spar, but from the looks of the tape, that hadn't happened.

There was no sound, but from what he could tell, Gris said something to the cat faunus, who replied in such a way as to trigger an indignant rant. While the Huntress-in-training paced and gesticulated wildly, Blake remained stock still in one place, only interjecting a word or two.

Eventually, whatever little input Blake was offering got to Gris, who got up in her face, poking her in the chest with a finger. Only then did Blake actually react, grabbing hold of Gris's wrist in a swift motion.

Jaune was almost out of his seat and off to hunt Blake down when he saw she merely held the wrist instead of dolling out any sort of retribution. The SHIELD agent looked Gris in the eye and said the most she had in the entire encounter. Whatever it was she said made Gris deflate before breaking the hold and turning away.

“What do you think they're saying?”

Pyrrha's sudden appearance behind him almost had Jaune jumping out of his skin. “Gah! I-I mean, I don't know. Gris didn't seem any different when she came back.” He switched the focus of the screens around back to the remote protocol he'd been writing for the armors earlier. “I thought you had gone to bed.”
In reply, she put her arms around him and leaned on his back, resting her chin on top of his head. “I did. Actually, I went to your bed. But you never showed up,” she said, sounding a bit put out.

One hand kept typing as the other came up to rest on her arms. “Sorry about that. I-I didn’t know.”

“Neither did I until the thought struck me,” she admitted. Silence reigned for a minute before she asked, “So are you going to stay up all night then?” It was a simple question, no ulterior motive or recrimination behind it at all, despite his expectations.

He responded with truth of his own. “I don't know. There's so much to do, and so much to think about... I don't know, Pyr.”

The pressure of her head on his disappeared and so did her arms, leaving him for a moment to wonder if he’d finally gone too far. Not long after, however, there was the soft scrape of a chair on the tiled floor and Pyrrha dropped into it beside him. For the first time, he could see she was wearing a modest wine-colored nightgown that stopped just above her knees, and had her hair down. She gave him a shy smile as she caught him staring and explained, “Then I believe you should have some company.”

He couldn't help but smile back. “I think I'd appreciate that.”

Pyrrha wasted no time reaching up and bringing the Sentry armor's progress screen into focus in front of her. “Maybe you won't when I give you my honest criticism.”

He went back to coding, but gave her a look out of the corner of his eye. “If it's about compensating for my lack of combat skill...”

“Actually, I was going to point out something else—something it only just occurred to me you wouldn’t know because you only just got your Aura unlocked.” She moved the Sentry panel aside and fired up the autoCAD in a new screen.

“What's that?” Even if she was criticizing him, Jaune felt more than at home as they fell into a familiar pattern of working side-by-side.

“Do you know why we use mecha-shifting weaponry when logic would dictate carrying separate melee and ranged weapons would be cheaper and less prone to mechanical failure?”

His lips twitched. “It's because of Aura-resonance, right?” The sidelong glance of surprise from her made him stifle a laugh. “I worked for Advanced Idea Mechanics for two years before Cinder set me up with Arc Industries and some of the orders I worked on was weapon designs for Hunters who didn't want to or couldn't design their own.

“Hunters use mecha-shift weapons because you put your Aura into your equipment to fight and the more you do that, the easier and more effective your Aura is at enhancing it. Using multiple weapons would dilute that effect.” He gave her a wry smile, “Which is why people think it was so unusual for you to prefer sword and board.”

Then his smile faded to confusion, “But what's that got to do with the Sentry?”

“It has nothing to do with the Sentry specifically, but I know you Jaune: Helios is on version 18.12 after just three years. You constantly scrap old designs for new, like the Scarab instead of upgrading in incremental steps. That works fine for what you normally do, but as a Hunter, doing that with your armor is going to be a liability.”

It took a moment to sink in before he blinked. “That's why you upgraded Hematite instead of going to the next version: because you're focusing on building an Aura-resonance with the suit.”
“Doing so means I have the maximum possible protection from both my armor and my Aura. I'm just trying to make sure you enjoy the same benefits: it may save your life one day.”

Jaune stopped typing as he digested that. Even though he'd seen first hand when Pyrrha's Aura integrated with the Mark 1, he never put a lot of though into it after the fact since he'd gotten so wrapped up in the practical design. She was right though: the enhancement from Aura-resonance couldn't be discounted.

“True, but I still need to find a design that works. The Scarab... never again. It was powerful, but slow. With luck, the Sentry will be the armor I can live with.--besides, from what Ozpin told us about there being worse things out there than Juggernaut, it's not a bad idea to have a big gun or two tucked away.”

“I can't disagree with that. Though I do think you need to focus on the basics—in combat among other areas, that's where every day success or failure will lie.”

Jaune pondered this, but before he could formulate a response, there was a chime and the satellite feed was forcibly given focus for both of them.

“Alert,” Glynda declared, “recon satellites indicate increased activity at the Humanity First base. Preliminary analysis: three tractor trailers, two troop transports, five military humvees and eight motorcycles are being prepared for deployment by at least thirty-four subjects.”

“So soon?” Pyrrha asked.

Meanwhile, Jaune wanted to slap himself. “Of course, the parade is on Friday, but there have been talks and workshops going on all week. Everyone they want to kill is already in the city and security won't be increased until the eve of the parade. Why wasn't I expecting this?”

“You did have a lot of things on your mind.” Pyrrha pointed out before turning to the screen. “Glynda, call Yang, Ruby and Lie Ren. Tell them to meet us here. Then prep the primary Hematite armor, Scarlet Spider, Wasp and...” she looked at Jaune questioningly.

He in turn checked the progress on the Sentry. After a moment of thought, he asked, “Glynda, how long until they're able to move?”

“By my estimation, they will be mobile within the next ninety minutes, Mr. Arc.”

“Just enough time,” he said, changing a few of the parameters on the rapid fabricators. “Skip painting the Sentry and assemble it directly onto a rack in the wardrobe.”

“I believe my safety and security protocols demand I object to you wearing an untested suit in battle, Mr. Arc. The Scarab is fully operational and repaired back to one hundred percent functionality should you choose not to make the suicidal choice.”

Pyrrha raised an eyebrow and turned in his direction. “I never ceases to amaze me how much like Professor Goodwitch you actually made her. It's more than a little disturbing, actually—not that I disagree with anything she's saying.”

Coughing nervously, Jaune got to his feet. “Just a quirk of the AI, I'm sure. As for the armor, I've be more comfortable in untested armor than armor I know won't perform the way I need it to.”

Folding her arms, she gave him a look that told him she wasn't buying it. “Would you say the same thing if the Sentry was something Arc Industries planned to sell to people?”
He took a deep breath, ready to defend himself, but she continued to stare him down, daring him to lie. After a beat, his shoulders slumped. “I've... got nothing. But think of it this way: Humanity First doesn't have any Dust-users. They don't advertise it much, but they don't like Hunters any better than they do faunus. This is probably a safer shakedown flight than going against a horde of Grimm in the Scarab.”

Pyrrha kept up her glare a short bit longer before relenting. “Fine. But be extra careful, okay?”

He offered her a cheeky smile. “Look on the bright side: I've got a whole team to back me up this time, right?”

Chapter End Notes

I know I promise to start the Ambush Arc with this chapter, but I had a bit more exposition and foreshadowing to do to the point that it became its own (short) chapter. To make up for it, I'll probably do an extra chapter this week to get us to the action. Also Nora. Lots of Nora.

New RWBY-izing of Marvel concepts: Teak Allan is T'challa, also known as the Black Panther, King of Wakanda, home to the Vibranium Mound, which is the greatest source of the key ingredient of adamantium in the world. Rey has a capsulized arrowhead, so people can guess who he is too now.

Blake and Gris's conversation gave me a lot of trouble because I ended up dancing around a reveal that really needed Jaune telling it, so I moved it to the security cams.
For the second time in the past twenty-four hours, Pyrrha opened the door to a tiny woman launching themselves at her. Only instead of coming feet-first like Ruby, Nora stormed in and wrapped her in a hug. “Thank you, thank you, thank you! You were right! He did remember and we talked and things are better and he's really sorry and I'm sorry too because it's kinda my fault, but it's more my dad's fault, but Ren says now's not the time to explain that, so I just wanna say thank you so much!”

The bear hug Nora had her in would have probably done actual physical harm to a normal person, but thanks to her Aura, it was only a mild discomfort to Pyrrha, not enough to prevent her her returning the young godling's hug and give her a warm smile. “I'm glad things worked out for you, Nora.”

“You aren't the only one.” Ren stood at the threshold, hands in the pockets of his suit jacket. He cast his gaze downward before adding, “And I most certainly owe you an apology. Several?”

Reluctantly, Pyrrha let Nora go. “You do. But now isn't the time. Everyone else is already downstairs preparing for the briefing.”

Nora took a step back and looked between her best friend and her new friend quizzically. She seemed to turn things over in her head before discarding whatever she'd been about to say and instead saying, “The 'briefing' is the part where we smash the soul eaters and corrupt einherjar, yes?”

“It's what she calls Grimm.” Ren supplied before Pyrrha could even think to ask.

“Well it's the part where we explain what we're going to do,” she informed Nora, “We'll be operating in the Emerald Forest, so there will most likely be Grimm, but our enemies tonight will be humans—Humanity First.”

Her fellow redhead scowled and gave her a suspicious look. “But there will still be smashing, yes?”

“...er, yes?”

“Excellent! Lead on to this 'briefing' then!” Nora instantly regained her pluck, slapping Pyrrha so hard on the back that she nearly knocked her down.

They made their way down to the lab where one of the draft tables had been cleared off to become a makeshift meeting table. Yang and a still nervous-looking Blake were sitting at one end while Jaune and Ruby were actually at a nearby work station, where Jaune was securing the straps of a set of bug-eyed goggles to Ruby's head.

“--not one of mine, this was from Arc Industries' R&D. The idea is to give the wearer all-around vision, but no one is able to process the information it gives you fast enough to act on it. I was thinking that since your Semblance necessarily speeds up your neural nerve conduction so you can actually maneuver at super speed, these might work for you.”

Ruby let out an awed 'Wow” and waved her hands around her head. “Oh man, this is great. I actually have eyes in the back of my head now. Hey!” She ducked as Jaune tried to smack her
upside the head. It took her a second to realize she'd done that without turning to see his hand, but thanks to the goggles. “They work! Sweet, I can sense danger before it happens!”

“That’s not actually how it wor—“ Jaune started.

“My 'spider sense' if you will. Ever notice how they just know when you're about to squish them with a shoe? Same deal. Spiders are psychic. And now, so am I! The proportional psychic powers of a spider!”

Jaune hung his head. “I give up.”

“Oh hey! Everyone's here.” Ruby said, then turned to face Pyrrha and the two SHIELD agents. “Ha, I saw you coming.”

“That's not how that...” Pyrrha started.

“You should probably just save your breath.” Jaune cut her off. “Now that we've got everyone, we can start.” He headed over to the drafting table. “Glynda, run it.”

The lights dimmed in the room so everyone could better see the holographic map being projected over the table.

“Seeing as everyone but me and Nora went to Beacon and this place is part of my family history... Nora, this Is the Emerald Forest, located directly north of the city of Vale and forming the north and northeastern border of Beacon's grounds. The area, stretching from the Beacon Cliffs to the sea, is a rich river delta humanity's been trying to claim for pretty much all of history, so it's lousy with ruin upon ruin. My ancestors built a palace there and to tell you how well that goes for literally everyone who's tried it, the place is so full of low-level Grimm that Beacon regularly uses the southern edge of the forest as a part of its initiation wherein the Headmaster sends the entire first year class into the forest on a trivial mission complicated by all those Grimm.”

A red dot appeared on the map and enlarged into the look-down satellite image. “The northern reaches, however, play home to lots of criminal activity. For example: there's a training camp for Humanity First located here: in the ruins of Castle Bastion. For the past few weeks, it's been their staging area for an attack on the Faunus Pride events coming up this weekend. They're mobilizing for that right now: several semis, troop carriers and motorbikes with the intent to enter Vale's north gates, enter the faunus district and kill any number of targets.”

He reached into the hologram and touched an irregularity on the map, causing it to highlight in green, becoming a meandering line that led to northern Vale. “They'll have to use the ancient road to get from Castle Bastion to Vale. I've picked this spot--” a blue dot appeared in the middle of the forest, “--as our ambush point. I am going to stop them up front while Nora and Yang pick off the APCs from behind and Pyrrha, Ruby and Ren will suppress their ability to respond.”

Yang raised her hand. “What about Blake?”

“Ozpin's orders, she's still grounded.” Jaune said without looking in their direction. “Plus, I don't have any armor for her.”

“You don't have any for the SHIELD guys.” Yang said with an accusatory glare.

Ren raised an eyebrow. “Point of order: she is a literal deity, and I'm not so sure powered armor will be conducive to my fighting style.”

“I do have ballistic vests based on the Hematite's micro-mail armor components if you two want to
He called up an image of a man in his mid-forties with styled white hair and what looked to be a perpetual smirk on his face. “Our secondary mission is capturing this man: Vincent Cleary. He's Humanity First's top bomb maker. His work has killed over two hundred men, women and children over the years and he's placed very high up in their chain of command. Getting him could give the authorities a wealth of information instrumental in doing real, lasting damage to their movement. The armors all have a facial recognition application that will scan for him during the fight.”

After pausing to see if there were questions of comments, he finished with, “One last thing: We're dealing with people who are consumed by their hate and rage to the point that they're on the way into the city looking to murder dozens of faunus and anyone who sympathizes with them. Heavy negative emotion. Expect Grimm. Don't just expect them, but expect ones you wouldn't expect in the Emerald Forest because they're going to be attracting some very old and exotic types out of the darkness. Blake, I've set up a console where you can watch all of our cameras plus the satellite feed. You can help out for now by noticing things we might not.” He looked around the table at the others, “Any questions?”

“We should probably point out to them that our intention here is less-lethal force,” Pyrrha piped up. “I know as Hunters, we've been taught... shall we say 'expedient' take-downs against other Hunter-level opponents, but almost no one in Humanity First has an unlocked Aura. What for us is a hard hit will kill normal people.” She lowered her eyes to the table top. “And believe me, you do not want that on your conscience.”

Jaune moved closer to her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. With the possible exceptions of Ren, Nora and Blake, he knew the others hadn't actually ended another human or faunus life. What seemed so simple, even blasé on TV and in comics where the tough, pragmatic hero casually busted heads and broke necks was, he now knew, anything but. “Right. All the suits have options for fighting Grimm, but we have repulsers, Ruby's adhesive spray--”

“Webbing!”

“... and Yang's ranged tasers--”

“Stingers!” Ruby corrected again.

“...for a reason. Do what you have to to come back alive and make sure the rest of us do too, but that's a last resort.”

Nora raised her hand, looking thoroughly confused. “So we are warriors still, yes?”

Jaune nodded. “But we don't vanquish our enemies?”

“Well yeah, we vanquish Grimm and robots if that becomes a thing. But we send the humans and faunus to jail, okay?”

She frowned, stroked her chin, then followed up with, “What about breaking their legs?”

“... you know what, do that. That's fine.” Jaune had he sudden, unsettling realization that he was...
going to have to set Nora down someday soon and ask after her whole story. And that he wasn't going to enjoy it one bit. “Any other questions.”

Ren leaned over to Nora. “Don't feel bad; this policy limits my efficacy a great deal too.”

“Right...” said Jaune. “Let's get suited up then. The convoy is already on the move.” Removing his arm from around Pyrrha, he started toward the Wardrobe.

“Ooo! I gotta question!” Ruby bounded around the table to follow. “We're on the other side of Vale from the Emerald Forest—how are we getting there? Do we have a private bullhead or something?”

Jaune hesitated. “Not yet... Actually, I hadn't thought of it this time. Yang can only fly in tiny form, you can't, Ren and Nora can't...”

“Yeah, I can!” Nora cut him off, brandishing her hammer. “I throw Magnhild and it carries me into the air!”

Utterly stupefied at the explanation even if now that he thought about it, he'd seen her airborne during the fight with Cardin, he looked to Ren, who he assumed knew the most about the Thunder Goddess. “Yes, that's exactly how it works. I've seen her do it multiple times now.”

“Yup. It's a thing.” Yang confirmed, having also seen Nora during the fight at the docks.

“And don't worry about me and Renny—I can carry him!” Nora said proudly, making the normally stoic SHIELD agent do a double take.

Ruby meanwhile, had started thinking. “Y'know, that's not a bad idea for the rest of us either. I'm little, so Jaune or Pyrrha can carry me, or I can just hang on to them with my Spider-stickiness...”

“You are really running the whole spider theme into the ground at this point.” Blake commented dryly.

Yang patted her sister on the head. “That's how you know it's working! Bug Sisters for life!” She and Ruby shared a fist bump.

“...and,” Ruby continued as if there had been no interruption, “Yang can be tiny and just ride on someone's shoulder. That works, right?”

“I don't see why not,” said Pyrrha. “The Sentry armor can more than accommodate carrying you on its back and Yang can fit anywhere.”

That decided, they finally made their way to the wardrobe. The now dubbed 'Bug Sisters' went through the armoring process first to make sure everything in their new suits fit and moved right one last time. This was the first time they had the fully painted versions on and both had to show them off once fully suited up.

Ruby's set was as form-fitting as it could get with the addition of the artificial muscles, with an overall red color scheme with blue panels along her ribs and under her arms. A set of slim gauntlets integrated both her cable launchers and adhesive nozzles with a touch/pressure based control panel in the heels of her palms. The fingertips of each glove and the soles of her boots glowed a soft blue was the electrostatic adhesion devices waited to be employed. She also had on a red (she insisted it was scarlet) utility belt with extra cartridges of adhesive, spare cables, and a field first-aid kit. The helmet, like Yang's, was a modified motorcycle helmet with the lower half narrowed to form a more insectile head and two reflective silver bug eyes in place of a visor. Jaune had already
installed elements of the all-around vision goggles into the helmet, allowing Ruby to make full use of it.

Yang on the other hand, was obviously, if lightly armored with yellow and black lobstered plates on her belly, back, arms and thighs over a dark yellow body suit that covered the artificial muscles. All the panels were flush to her body in order to transfer as much kinetic force to her for use with her semblance while still redirecting slashing, piercing or energy attacks. The belt was fully concealed with a wrist-mounted control suite designed to link to the buckle controls as Jaune was reluctant to mess with ancient dust-based tech. Upon her back were a set of dragon-fly like wings, which weren't operational until she shrunk, and her helmet sported glossy, black bug eyes and a mouth piece designed to look like a vertical mouth. He 'Stingers' hung from holsters at her hips, ready to be deployed at a moment's notice.

After they were done, Jaune and Pyrrha suited up.

Pyrrha's Hematite armor hadn't been altered much externally despite some fine tuning to the joints and upgrades to the artificial muscles that no one not looking more closely could notice. Most of her upgrades were in faster response times and increased output to the repulsers.

Jaune, of course, was in the all-new Sentry armor, fresh out of the rapid fabricators. All told, the armor added a good two and a half feet to his height with its bulky feet designed to produce a cushion of air for the suit to ride on like a hovercraft and a set of shoulder-mounted point-defense repulsers that rose above his head level when not active. The arms were similarly overbuilt, housing an bank of three repulsers each as well as a pair of small plasma cutters. The Scarab's shield and the Guillotine sword were also present, racked into place under the 'cape' of heat sinks.

But there was one detail that stood out among all others—and made Yang and Ruby burst out laughing.

"Seriously? You made it all gold?" Yang doubled over, her shoulders shaking with mirth. "You look like an awards statue for 'Best Overkill in a Leading Role'"

Ruby snorted, leaning on her big sister. "Sentry isn't the right name for that thing. How about.. Freedom Bling? Swagman?"

"Ha, ha, very funny." Jaune muttered, folding his arms. "The gold is the base metal: a gold-titanium alloy to prevent icing at high altitudes. I interrupted the paint process before the blue could be added because, you know, we've got lives to save?"

Pyrrha, who had been kind enough not to join in at that point, raised a finger. "Oh, I know: The Cash!" That set the other two plus Nora off into more howls of laughter.

"It's good you have a sense of humor about this, Pyrrha," Yang mimed wiping a tear away, "Because with that kind of compensating... you poor woman."

"You know what? You can all bite my glorious, golden ass." Jaune grumbled, triggering the ceiling above to iris open. A light rain fell from the night sky into the open wardrobe. "Are we ready to go now?"

"Aye-aye Cap'n Shiny pants!" Nora saluted and started twirling her hammer.

As if sensing danger, Ren turned to her. "Now Nora, when you said you could carry me..." But it was too late. Nora hurled Magnhild forward while at the same time grabbing him by the back of his suit jacket as she was hauled (and in turn hauled him) into the air, trailing a yelp of panic and
surprise behind.

“Let's go kick all the ass!” Yang pounded her fists together before triggering her belt and shrinking down to action figure size. She then flew on mechanical wings over to land on Pyrrha's shoulder. “Onward faithful steed! Tally-ho!”

“I could just leave you behind, you know?” Pyrrha mused with a laugh before lighting up her repulsers and flying after Nora.

Ruby laughed happily and sprang from the floor, up to Jaune's arm, then wall-crawled around to hang off his back along the heat sinks like a baby koala. “Hold on...” she said as he started to set off as well. Deftly, she took out the MP# player she'd snuck into her utility belt and synced it to her comm so it played on her channel to everyone. She'd paused it at exactly the right moment to provide just the right soundtrack to the team's first foray into the field.

A female vocalist, backed by driving guitars belted out, “Prepare for your greatest moments/prepare for your finest hour/the dream that you've always dreamed is/suddenly about to flower.”

With that playing in all their comms, the full team struck out into the cold, the dark and the rain, ready to meet their enemies and protect the innocent.

Chapter End Notes

And so we have the full team. Yeah, Blake needs to officially join in the field and Weiss is... complicated, but there we have it. This coming up is one of the big action setpieces I had in mind from the start. It's basically the Arc Reaction take on Initiation. Action, scenery porn, precious ruins from the past smashed to bits in epic battles. Oh my yes.

Feel free to suggest your own nicknames for the Sentry armor, I can't get enough out of mocking it and Jaune's desperate overcompensation for his lack of combat experience.

One thing I will say is that I feel the mix of Nora and Thor here broke down a little bit. I previously only had her lapse into the super-proper style of talking when pissed off, but she did it her when confused. Trying to keep it consistent, but it's a hard road to hoe. It's especially hard because unlike Pyrrha, Yang, Ruby or Penny, who all have a very specific cadence to their speech patterns that makes knowing you've captured their voice super-easy, Nora... doesn't have that, but Thor does. So let me know if it gets weird or annoying.

The whole reason I write fanfiction is the challenge of sticking to the originals in given ways. It builds skills I use in the writing I do for a living. The flip side of that is that it's much easier to stick to a character you made rather than someone else's. I say this as a professional novelist: fanfiction is WAY HARDER to do well.

References... Jaune quotes Bender from Universe 1 from Futurama.

Ruby seems to have been struck by a mote of inspiration, ala Discworld, where she's just totally in synch with Stan Lee in terms of what all her stuff should be called. I
almost had her play the theme from Spectacular Spider-man during the last part, but it wouldn't be RWBY without her playing This Will Be The Day before battle.
The rain was falling in sheets, sweeping across the ancient road deep in the heart of the Emerald Forest. The noise of wind and water drowned out the various growls of the various vehicles, but served to scatter the lights of their high beams, making them visible from an even greater distance.

They were even more visible in Jaune's night vision. Enhanced thanks to the advanced sensors in the Sentry armor, the scopes were able to pick out the lead truck in the convoy of mayhem in vivid detail. It was a big, powerful long-haul rig, built to pull double trailers and armored to protect the driver from minor Grimm. Thick steel bars formed a wedge-shaped grate along the front, all the better to knock aside obstacles or crash a city's gate at speed.

It rode at the front of a column, surrounded by a quartet of outriders on motorbikes. More semis followed, with the APCs bringing up the rear.

Jaune couldn't help it, he started piecing together what much be Humanity First's plan. The front truck would ram the gate, then the semis, each probably rigged with a bomb, would fan out in the faunus section of Vale while the APCs containing their best fighters and support personnel held outside the gate until the semis blew. Then the fighters, none of whom would be a Dust-user considering Humanity First's prejudices, mopped up the injured and distracted.

A brutal plan that would cost hundreds of lives—then hundreds more as a major terror attack would no-doubt attract Grimm—who would find one of Vale's gates breached.

He shuddered to think of the ultimate toll.

“Everyone look sharp,” he said into the comm, “Here they come.” He swung the shield around in front of him and triggered the pile bunker. The carbon steel spike punched right through the centuries-old stone pavers that made up the road, burying itself in the softening earth. He followed up by triggering another set of pile bunkers in the back of the Sentry's calves, pinioning himself behind the shield in a braced position.

The headlights disappeared, hidden behind the last hill before contact.

A narrow notch expanded open in the shield, extending about a third of the way down. Carefully, Jaune crouched Guillotine in railgun mode in that space, primed and ready to fire.

“Anything in infrared?” he asked.

“Just like you thought,” Pyrrha's voice came in over the comms, “The semis only have drivers. Looks like the trailers are bombs.”

Jaune shook off the mental image of destroyed city blocks and bloody bodies littering the landscape. That wouldn't be happening. Not tonight. Not on his and his team's watch. “Right. Wasp, uh... Nora, just like I told you, okay? Do not let those things blow anywhere near people.”

“Got it, Fearless leader!”

“Oh, I can have fun with this. You hyped, sis?”
“So hyped! I've been coming up with witty one-liners since we landed!”

The headlights reappear, this time shining on the Sentry’s shield. Almost predictably, the driver floored it, tired spinning on the wet stone road before getting better traction, sending the truck lurching forward.

Even wrapped in eight hundred pounds of gold-titanium alloy didn't keep Jaune’s brain from demanding he flee when a huge truck was bearing down on him, but he swallowed his mind-numbing terror, took aim and fired. The tungsten spike narrowly missed the forward grate and sliced cleanly into the grill, meeting the engine block and a flare of Spark and Burn Dust before the whole thing died in billowing black smoke.

Inertia carried the truck forward, but with no more power to accelerate, it struck the shield without even them momentum necessary to truly test the pile bunker's spike, though the grate was still crushed like a beer can.

It took the bikers a moment to notice something was wrong, at which point they opened up on the shield with submachine gun fire as they passed.

Barely visible in the rain, a cable with a blue-glowing nodule on the end streaked out and adhered to the shoulder of one of the lead bikers. He was pulled forcibly from his ride and swung screaming through the air until he slammed into the man on the bike behind him, both of them tumbling hard across the ground as their bikes toppled and rolled off the road.

On the other side, both bikes’ front wheels (or possibly—and more accurately, the steel rims of their front wheels) stopped abruptly causing their riders to pitch over their handlebars and skid painfully a few feet down the road. When they stopped to look, they found their transport flying through the air and vanishing in the woods.

The lead truck stopping caused a chain reaction of screeching brakes and screaming rubber as the vehicles behind them had to stop, some veering off the road into the woods on either side.

Jaune wished he hadn't figured out what the semis were for until they were already lying in wait for them. No matter what feats of engineering he was capable of, none of them would survive being at ground zero of an explosion meant to level a building. The resultant change of plans was crude and dangerous but it was all they had.

As he disengaged the pile bunkers to he could move again, he watched Ruby swing out of the trees to stick to the side of one of the trucks behind the leader and, using the strength boost of artificial muscles, rip the door off. “Sorry,” She said, voice full of mirth, “We need your truck.” the the enhanced audio sensors, it was actually possible to hear her rip the seat belts moments before the driver was hurled bodily out of the cab, followed shortly by his passenger, who never even managed to draw her gun.

Hopping out of the now empty truck, Ruby gave a whistle, followed by, “All yours, Wasp!”

The rain reflected the flash of violet and red and blue as Yang's size-changing belt activated. The truck lurched as she went from bug-sized to building sized underneath it until she was holding the semi and its trailer in one hand like a toy.

“Ha, hey, Spidey! Check this out!” She shifted the truck in her hand so it was held lengthwise in a classic javelin thrower's pose. Then she raise a thumb as if using it to gauge the wind. “Guess who I am!” Amid Ruby's giggles, Yang hurled the truck for all she was worth off into the darkness of the forest.
On the other side of the road, sparks flew as Hanashite cut through the couplings and connecting wires that attached the cab of another semi to its trailer. “Very funny, Wasp.” Pyrrha said, no small amount of challenge in the tone. “But for your information, this is how I would do it.”

The trailer became rimed in the black miasma of her semblance before being launched in a high arc over the treetops.

“Yours might go farther, but mine had more style.” Yang muttered, unimpressed.

Somewhere deep in the Emerald Forest, the hard rain and a flooding cave had driven a very old Deathstalker to the surface. It was several hundred years old and thus, was actually capable of contemplating how much it hated the rain, but also to ponder the marking outside it domicile. Long ago, men had feared it so much, they actually scratched crude pictographs in the living rock to warn against its presence.

As it was nurturing a faint stirrings of pride in its terrible nature, it became aware of something... wrong. It was an odd feeling, something akin to deja-vu, but not quite. It looked skyward and there, against the dark clouds and the beating rain, it picked out something huge and metallic hurtling end over end toward it.

The last things to pass through the old beast's mind (aside from a great deal of burning shrapnel), were the phrase 'not again' and a string of curses on the names Jaune Arc, Nora Valkyrie, Pyrrha Nikos and Lie Ren.

And many scholars believe that if one were to discover why the creature thought that, they would instantly gain a much deeper understanding of the universe.

Ignoring the distant explosion and an inexplicably feeling of nostalgia, Jaune stomped forward past the cab of the lead truck. The driver threw the door open and fired three shots into the back of the Sentry armor's head. The damage didn't even trigger a report from the suit's sensors.

“You can't stop us! Whatever you are, you can't stop us!” he screamed, firing three more until his revolver clicked on empty.

“I think it's pretty plain to see we're stopping you idiots easily.” Jaune pointed out, speaking through the suit's external speakers. Farther down the line, Nora could be heard laughing alongside the smashing of metal that used to be APC engine blocks. To make his point, he drew Guillotine and cut through everything connecting the trailer to the cab in one swing. Bringing the sword back up to rest on his armor's shoulder, he looked squarely at the driver. “You're going to jail tonight. All of you. You can't run: just being here, you're calling every Grimm in the forest, so that's out. And you can't defeat us.

“While you're there, I really hope you think about how much time and resources you guys have put into making the world a worse place. And failing that, remember this:” On his signal, Yang bounded over and picked up the truck, lobbing it into the woods, “Vale? It's off limits to you. If we catch you setting up a base around here, we will trash it and take everyone to jail again. And there's nothing in your arsenal that can stop us.”

The driver opened his mouth to protest, but a stream of liquid adhesive cocooned him and stuck him to the side of his truck for good measure. Ruby leapt over his head and landed on top of the
“How did these guys think they could take on even Hunters-in-training with no Semblances and no Dust?”

Jaune shrugged, a far more expansive gesture in the armor. “I dunno, I seem to be doing pretty well.”

“Oh, I'm sorry! I forgot you didn't have a Semblance yet... and just got your aura unlocked. Sorry!” She jumped off the truck to land on his back, patting his helmet like she was trying to soothe and angry pet.

“Don't worry about it. We've still got a lot of trailers to get through. Come on.” He trudged forward, moving to the next truck in line. A hail of bullets met him as half a dozen Humanity First members with assault rifles tried to take up a defensive position around it. Ruby dropped down behind him, not used to being bulletproof.

It was just as well for Jaune, who sheathed Guillotine and raised his now empty palm. The three palm-mounted repulsers started firing in sequence, the timing mimicking the speed of a machine gun. Blue streaks filled the air as repulser blasts struck humanity First members, sending them airborne to smack into the truck they were protecting or bouncing along the road.

Watching them fall so easily made him think back to Ruby's words and earlier Pyrrha's explanation as to why Hunters didn't rule the world. Powered armor would change that equation. It was expensive yes, but once acquired, anyone could use it with very little in the ways of checks and balances, not even the availability of Dust.

A shining beacon of equality. Or the start of tyranny. It reminded him of why he hadn't told the world about his development: much like the weapons that started it all, they could be used for good or terrible evil.

Pushing those thoughts down, he strode toward the trailer, careful to move around its downed defenders. The doors were hanging open; evidently, the driver and passenger had bailed. Before he could set to work on the trailer, there was a burst of submachine gun fire in the woods off to his left.

“We've got incoming Grimm.” Ren's voice announced on their open channel. “Mostly beowolves and ursae with boarbatusks filling in the gaps, but I see at least two King Taijitus.”

“Moving to back you up.” Jaune stepped away from the trailer. “Nora, how's it coming with the APCs?”

Laughter was his answer. “All gone! There's just these annoying guys on bikes and the guys from inside the armored thinigies now. Hey! Hold still!” An explosion sounded from the rear of the convoy, followed by an annoyed growl by Nora. “They won't stand and fight! What kind of warriors are these?!?”

Moving around the truck he'd chosen to abandon, Jaune broke into a jog toward the woods. Night vision was starting to pick up the front line of Grimm. Now immobilized, the Humanity First members would be easy pickings for the Grimm without Dust or much more powerful weaponry than was within their grasp. They'd saved the faunus of Vale, Now it was time to protect the bad guys.

“Show 'em how a true warrior fights, Nora.” he encouraged before addressing the others. “Hematite, Wasp, focus on the trailers; get them away from the road. Lob some into the rear of the Grimm Horde if you can. Scarlet Spider, mop-up duty: or rather web-up: capture all these guys
before they do something stupid like run off into the woods and get eaten.”

“On it!” Ruby enthused.

The only answers Pyrrha or Yang offered was a pair of trailers flying overhead to crash down into the forest almost two hundred yards away. A pair of flashes signaled both the Wasp Stings and Hanashite’s plasma cannon mode firing.

It was hard to tell who detonated their over-sized grenade first, because two powerful explosions rocked the nighttime forest, shattering and uprooting trees and obliterating Grimm in twin blast waves that liquefied what they didn’t rip apart first. Moments later, another trailer was lobbed even farther back into the horde.

That left the leading edge, which was too close to their allies to simply blow up. Jaune drew Guillotine, raised his shield, and activated the hover units on his armor’s legs. Repulsers set to low thrust drove him forward on a cushion of air to meet the Grimm.

An ursa rose to meet him first. He bashed it back into its brethren with his shield before bringing his sword around to spit it in half, destroying a pair of young beowolves in the same swing. More beowolves surged forward, trying to mob him, but they were met by his shield and knocked to the ground. He finished them with a series of brutal hacks to the body.

Then impact. Something struck him with incredible force on the left side. Without solid ground under his feet, he almost pitched over. Only by catching himself on his shield did he correct and turn in time to see the car-sized boarbatusk that hit him bounce back and unroll, landing a few yards away and pawing at the ground, ready for another strike.

With a squealing roar, the great boar threw itself forward, rolling into an armored ball once more for another got at Jaune. He got his shield up, but was driven backward into a crowd of ursae who bit and clawed at his arms and back.

Jaune threw his shield-arm back, bashing one ursa in the face before using his repulser-based propulsion to turn and lay into the bear-Grimm with his sword. But that was the worst thing he could do, as evidenced by another squeal roar behind him.

He whirled again, only to see a magenta comet slam into the spinning boar, sending it veering off wildly into the horde, smashing and slashing its way through several other beowolves before crashing into a tree. Its back spines stuck.

It tried to escape by unrolling, but by then, the ‘comet’ had resolved into Lie Ren, wrapped in a cocoon of his own aura. Taking careful aim, he sent a burst of bullets into the creature’s now-exposed underbelly, causing it to go limp as whatever force animated Grimm left it.

An older, heavily armored beewolf lunged at Ren, seeking to take his head off with its claw. The SHIELD agent stepped into the blow, gracefully avoiding death while slicing the arm off at the elbow with the left Stormflower. Then he pivoted as the monster reeled and brought the right one up, cutting it from groin to chin and sending it flying backward.

Continuing the upward motion, he jumped, kicked off the still-falling beewolf, and used that momentum to launch himself into the gut of another blades-first. He then turned that into a pair of sideways slashes that split the beast in twain, following up by opening fire between the two still-falling chunks of Grimm to shoot several more.

“Damn...” Jaune muttered, feeling utterly upstaged as he hacked down another ursa.
Nonetheless, the two of them had earned the attention of the horde—for whatever good it did the Grimm. Black and white feral bodies piled into a two-man meat-grinder, howling and snarling with abandon as Aura and steel tore through them.

Jaune lunged at a rearing beowolf alpha, skewering the hulking monster on the end of Guillotine. Impalement didn't quite do the job against an alpha, however, and the Grimm actually grabbed he sword, pulling itself further down its length to bring itself within range to claw at its killer.

It froze Jaune's blood to think about what happened to a normal Hunter in that situation, but safely ensconced in a fortress of metal, He merely halted the creature's progress with a palm to the chest —then fired all three repulsers in that palm into it at point blank range. Pinned by the sword, the beowolf's upper torso simply vaporized, leaving the bottom half to thump to the ground leaking the black smoke that followed the grim like grave-stench.

Even separated from the fight by layers of protection as he was though, Jaune had to take a moment to center himself after that.

He didn't get that moment.

“Warning.” Glynda cut in over his thoughts. The little window in his vision that showed the satellite view of the forest started flashing, outlined in red. “Satellite monitoring has detected inbound aircraft. Make: Vale-Atlas Standard Bullhead. Three subjects approaching from the south at one-hundred thirty miles per hour and decelerating. Visual contact in thirty seconds.”

“Bullheads?” Jaune wondered out loud. Everyone used Bullheads, the body plans were open source thanks to the altruism of early flight pioneers who understood how valuable reliable, tough aircraft were to human/faunus survival. “Hey, did anyone call Beacon or Vale to pick up these guys?”

“Not yet,” Pyrrha replied, “I didn't want to bring more people here until we had the Grimm under control.”

“Anyone call SHIELD?” he asked.

“We're following your lead.” Ren pointed out, dodging a swipe from an ursa and replying with twin bursts of fire to its eyes. “No extra contact with SHIELD without your say so.”

Jaune turned toward the approaching ships, letting a young ursa try and fail to bite through his upper arm. Sure enough, a trio of Bullheads were slowing down to deployment speed less than a mile from the road. As they slowed for final approach, they turned, bringing their loading ramps to bear.

As they came to broadsides, however, the enhanced visual scanners of the Sentry clearly picked out the wolf's head and triple claw-mark insignia of the White Fang. And as the ramps opened, they also picked up at least a dozen missile racks set up at the pen bay doors, aimed at the trucks, the members of Humanity First, and most importantly, the rest of the team.

A very powerful speaker cut in, sending a voice booming out over all present. “Attention Humanity First. This is Adam Taurus, Leader of the White Fang. I'll keep this short: Good Riddance.”

Chapter End Notes
And so it begins.

I feel like this chapters was a little too detached at the start. I was trying to play with the mood with the rain and the ambush tactics to make it more obvious when this goes from simple bug-hunt to actual fight, but I probably went too far that way. Next chapter things get faster-paced and personal, so if this wasn't that good, rest assured the next one will be.

If you're wondering about the Deathstalker scene, well that poor scorpions' probably been killed a billion times in the multiverse of fanfiction by now to the point that it probably knows who's going to do it now. I don't think any other Grimm besides the dragon has recurred as much in the fandom.

And Adam/Crimson Dynamo steps onto the scene. I've been waiting for this fight a long time. It's got a lot of action, a lot of meaning for the general arc of this story, and I'm hoping it will be epic!

Finally, people seem inordinately eager to hear what I have to say about the trailer. Well I'm a writing guy, I'm not sure I can draw anything personal from the trailer other than holy crap, the animation is gorgeous. So very wary of the Time Skip. It's a classic means of sweeping things under the rug, but like I've said time and time again, I'm willing to give the series one more season to prove itself and I won't let my prejudice against a trope interfere with that.

That said (SPOILERS) Ruby is Spawn.

No, don't argue. You can't slip Leetha K-7 past me. I am a connoisseur of symbiotic superhero accessories from Venom to The Greatest American Hero Suit to Leetha.

Before it hasn't been made clear that her petals and the weirdness of her cape are actual things in the universe or just artistic license, but the gorilla Grimm (Berengal?) clearly sees and reacts to both, so she's Spawn. Well a Hellspawn, I guess, since she's certainly not Al Simmons.

Also she can fly. Like, she actually flies. When she's on the rooftop and dodges the overhead smash, she... flies. I wish I knew that when assigning superheroes in this fic. Yang could have been (Gi)ant-woman and Ruby could have been Wasp. She's a lot like cartoon! Jan anyway.

Or Spawn. I could have made her Spawn. He was ripped off from spider-Man anyway.

If Yang turns into an angel or Ozpin is God and Ruby kills him, I quit. Because she's Spawn and no one told me*.

*Please don't take the joke seriously**.

**With the red and black color scheme, she's clearly Carnage. Duh.
The Sentry’s advanced optical sensors instantly picked it up: a hulking set of powered armor in the lead White Fang Bullhead. It was as big as an Atlanian Paladin, almost half again as big as the Sentry, but nothing could keep Jaune from picking out something descended from his design when he saw it.

Seeing it caused the rest of the world to fall away for Jaune.

Adam Taurus, the same man who took his anti-Grimm weapons and killed soldiers, killed civilians — almost killed Pyrrha with them... now had his ultimate weapon. Seeing as how there was no way Taurus knew he and the others would be there, he'd brought that monstrosity to slaughter an enemy terrorist organization.

Somewhere, it registered in the back of his mind that Yang was cursing in the comms and someone—he thought it might have been Blake, was actively growling.

“No.” He might as well have breathed the word out for how softly he said it. “No.” he said it louder, taking his aggression out on an ursa that happened to cross his path in that moment, grabbing it by the head and smashing it into a tree until it went limp.

Over the Bullhead's speakers, Adam chuckled, a low, dark sound. “What’s this? We have someone intruding on our affairs.” His words started out playful, but then petered out as he apparently got a better read on what he was seeing. “That armor... you. You!” For all the racial insensitivity of the imagery, he sounded like a rabid animal. “You're the ones that took what was mine from me! You will pa--” The speaker squealed, popped and cut out.

“I have had quite enough of everyone finding out our secret identities every ten minutes.” Pyrrha explained over the comm. “It's lucky for us the speakers were unshielded.”

Jaune knew he should have replied to that, complemented her on her quick thinking and creative use of her power. He even knew he was starting to get tunnel vision, but his outrage was overriding his common sense. “Glynda, remotely scan for whatever frequency the White Fang are broadcasting on and get me on it.” Switching to comms, he said, “Nora, come take my place backing up Ren.”

“Sure thing, fearless leader! It's gotten boring since I ran out of land conveyances to smash.”

Knowing Nora would be there soon, Jaune sheathed Guillotine and racked the Scarab's shield to his back. By that time, Glynda chimed back to him. “Break-in complete, sir. You are now able to listen into and speak with White Fang communications without them being able to passively listen to the team network.”

“It's perfect.” Jaune opened up the new frequency available in his HUD. “There's nothing her for you, Adam. Humanity First has been neutralized. Vale's faunus are safe from them. Turn around now or you and I are going to have a talk about that armor.”

“Oh, we'll have a talk alright.” Adam didn't even sound surprised that his communications had been hacked. “Not just a talk, but a reckoning. You took something very special from me, Jaune Arc—and I am going to make you pay.”
Jaune set his jaw, not wanting the nasty smile that was forming to get there. He'd secretly been hoping Adam wanted a fight. “We didn't mean to kill so many of your people when we escaped—that was... a mistake. But that doesn't—“

“Shut up.” Adam cut him of, voice monotone. “Shut your stinking human face about those others who died. Compared to what I lost, I don't give a damn about them. You took from me my heart: Blake Belladonna, Arc. You killed her. After having lost her for years, I finally got her back, ripped her from the corruption and propaganda of humans and was beginning to turn her back to the side of right—and you murdered her!” A snarl entered his voice. “So before I kill you, I'm going to make you pay. Don't think I forgot how much you wanted to protect your woman, Arc. And even if I don't know which of these armor's she's in—I'm going to make sure she dies in front of you first. All batteries fire at will!”

White smoke billowed out from the trio of bullheads as dozens of missiles leapt from their racks with the intent of raining down onto the decimated Humanity First column.

Jaune opened up all the repulser propulsion batteries on the Sentry suit and the Scarab shield, firing them all for maximum acceleration. Before he even got into the air though, the response was already underway.

A cloud of swirling particles signaled Yang reaching full size, almost ten stories tall. Ripping a pair of trees out of the ground by the roots, she started swatting missiles out of the air with them. At the same time, other missiles became sheathed in black radiance and redirected into the forest. A few strays struck the road ahead of and behind the convoy, blasting chunks of ancient stone into the air.

Adam wasn't done yet. Opening his arms wide, he charged his suit's dynamos and unleashed a cascade of white-blue lightning aimed directly at Yang. The fingers of crackling electricity arced into her and the trees she was carrying.

Her scream carried in the thunder of the rain as she stumbled back, then went down, crashing through a number of trees, hitting the ground hard enough to make the ground shake.

“Yang!” Ruby shouted, immediately abandoning mop-up duty to swing off into the woods where her sister fell.

Jaune would have followed her, but Adam picked that moment to laugh into the comm. “What that her? Wait. Don't bother: you wouldn't tell me if it wasn't. Let's try the next one.” Jet turbine units extended from his suit's shoulder blades and the back of its calves, spinning up to full power to launch him out of the bullhead. He then reached back and pulled a long, metallic cudgel from his back. Mecha-shift systems engaged, unfolding it into a massive cleaver with hundreds of small, spinning grinders along the leading edge. “This time though, let's get up close and personal.”

“Yeah.” Jaune said, his own voice going almost as monotone as Adam's had earlier. “Let's.”

Unshipping Guillotine from behind the Scarab shield, he led with it and directed more power to the repulsers, rising like a reverse meteor to meet Adam and his suit head-on.

The two metallic titans met with full force in a flash of sparks as Adam's cleaver's grinders started tearing into the edge of Guillotine. They pushed off, Jaune opening fire with palm repulsers while Adam opened up the right forearm of his suit and deployed duel machine guns, firing full auto with Dust rounds.

Warning lit up Jaune's HUD as the Dust rounds damaged his armor and sapped his aura.
“Maneuverability mode!” He ordered. The re-specced Scarab shield separated into seven connected modules while hundreds of small flight control surfaces extended from the suit and the on-board AI took over the flying, performing an aileron roll to avoid the stream of gunfire.

Adam responded by opening the left forearm to reveal a trio of mini-missile racks, locking on a firing a swarm of rockets that homed in on Jaune, striking him in rapid succession and throwing a whole new series of damage warnings, including a report that the ‘cape’ heat sink had taken a few hits.

Falling back, Jaune opened Guillotine up in railgun mode as a hale of steely spikes flashed by, peppering Adam a high speed.

Pyrrha flew up from below, swinging Hanashite for his chest-plate, then reversing her swing at the last moment as he dodged to strike one of the missile racks off his arm before dropping down to clear the way for Jaune's railgun shot.

The tungsten spike from Guillotine's railgun smashed through the left shoulder of Adam's suit, turning him almost fully around and locking the joint in place.

Seeing the opening, Pyrrha came in close again, slashing at the engines in his back, but explosions of sparks and arcing electricity drove her back before she could do any damage. “He's protected by some sort of active defense,” she told Jaune, “If you can give me a moment, I have an idea.”

“Got it.” Jaune chambered a new tungsten spike.

Adam reached up and ripped the spike in his shoulder out, his suit starting its self-repair routine. “You've certainly made some upgrades since Vacuo, but so have I. Let me show you a new one!” The grinders in his cleaver span up again, but this time embedded Dust crystals conducted the massive electrical potential of the Crimson Dynamo suit into them. “My Wilt is too small to wield in the suit, but luckily, there are some very talented faunus scientists in the White Fang. And they gave me the next best thing.”

Revving his jet engines, he dove forward with an overhand swing of the charged cleaver.

Jaune fired the repulsers with one hand and another with Guillotine just as Adam reached him. The cleaver missed Jaune's chest, but cut into the suit's thigh, sending thousands of volts of electricity into the Sentry suit and nearly blinding Jaune with error and damage warnings. The railgun spike missed, sparking off the side of the Crimson Dynamo's helmet enough to blind Adam as well.

Getting his feet up at Adam's chest, Jaune fired his flight repulsers and launched himself away from the White Fang leader.

With a string of curses, Adam moved to follow, but then Pyrrha was there. Hanashite was in plasma cannon mode, but she wasn't firing it. Instead, she was firing it in a continuous beam while using her Semblance to hold the plasma in place in the form of a three-foot solid blade.

Having just finished clearing his vision of scrolling HUD reports, Jaune could only gawk for a moment and say, “As if I couldn't love you any more...”

“Only say that if it actually works.” She replied cheekily before driving forward, flying in a low swoop to avoid a swing of the charged cleaver. The plasma sword swept up and burned a trail of molten steel across the Crimson Dynamo's chest, but didn't penetrate through to anything vital. She reversed to make another cut, only to be side-swiped by the machine-gun hand, knocking her away
from him.

He followed up with withering machine gun fire that forced her to bring up Kiku to block. Even with the shield up, the impact of the Dust-propelled rounds drove her back and downward in air and left an opening for Adam to fire a missile at her while she was preoccupied.

Pyrrha tried to dodge, but the homing missile clipped her boots in passing and exploded, knocking her primary thrusters offline and sending her plummeting to the canopy.

Seeing this, Jaune shouted, almost deafening himself for doing so in the confines of the helmet. “Py... Hematite! Are you okay?” Even as he asked, he opened up a battery of fire from a palm repulser bank into Adam's back.

“It wasn't as bad as it looked,” she replied with a groan. Auto repair looks like I won't be flying for another two minutes, but it could have been worse.”

“Thank Dust...” Dropping down, Jaune sought to drive Guillotine into the large suit's arm.

“That's the one.” Adam's words cut in over Jaune's relief while deflecting the sword blow with a casual swing of a metal fist. “You're going all out to keep me from following her down and finishing her off.” He revved the grinders in his cleaver. “Not that your best can even scratch the Crimson Dynamo.” He turned partly away from Jaune, scanning over the much-abused canopy for signs of Pyrrha and the Hematite armor.

With a low growl, Jaune sheathed Guillotine. “That's not me fighting all-out. You want to see what my all looks like?”

He already knew the answer, scrolling through all the control options of the suit. There was one last-resort weapons built into every powered version of the armor above the Mark 2 generation. The Unified Repulser Beam Generator.

It was actually built on an old dead-end technology he'd developed: a device that concentrated and redirected the energy of a repulser blast so that the ordinarily diffuse (and therefore less-lethal) discharge was all channeled into a singular beam of force.

The intent was to make an alternative to plasma cutters, but as it turned out, stable beams couldn't be formed with a beam-width smaller than three inches across. Plus, it was highly inefficient for the proposed purpose and generated dangerous amounts of waste heat.

As a weapon however...

Jaune spread his arms wide and the pectoral plates above his sternum slid open, revealing the Generator's lens. On the previous designs, the Arc Reactor would be positioned directly behind this to reduce the amount of wiring that had to go to the device. For the Sentry, Jaune had used the back-mounted reactors as an excuse to build a more robust unit, which at this point was glowing a searing blue in the night sky.

He would admit that he wasn't the best at naming things, but he was really proud of 'Unibeam'.

Adam had no time to react as Jaune dropped the Sentry to a lower angle and took aim. In the next moment, a bar of blue-white light tore the sky between the two armored figures and the Crimson Dynamo was hammered out of the air in a cloud of blue ionizing gas.

Trees practically exploded as the Crimson Dynamo crashed through a swathe of forest, swallowed up by greenery and rain.
Warnings flashed before Jaune's eyes:

'System Temperature is outside of optimal parameters.'

'Coolant leak in Supplemental Heat Sinks 7, 12, 15-22, 27 and 30. Sealing.'

'Pilot Safety Protocol 00384-B triggered. Locking out Unibeam Task Administration until System Temperature normalizes'.

The earlier damage to the heat sinks appeared to have been worse than Jaune thought. Firing the Unibeam had exacerbated them. Not that that was going to take him out of the fight. Adam's machine was deadly and needed to be stopped.

He'd had enough time to see the suit in action now. The White Fang's scientists were good, but it was based on his design. A number of underlying flaws were becoming apparent to him—especially the fact that it was clear Crimson Dynamo was powered by Dust of some type, not an Arc Reactor. That meant fragile Dust relays instead of reinforced, redundant wiring. Disable that and no self-repair system would even work.

Drawing Guillotine one more time, Jaune flew low other the forest, scanning for the enemy.

“Guys, I don't know who's in a position to do anything, but the White Fang Bullheads are landing.”
Jaune had almost forgotten Blake was watching the remote feeds. “I can't see them for the trees, but I can promise there will be plenty of Dust users. Adam's been working anyone who isn't a specialist nearly to death for years to force their Auras to unlock so he can arm them with Dust rifles.”

“Oh, bring 'em on.” Yang's voice said, sounding a bit groggy still. “I can take a hundred grunts with less training than a first year kid at Signal no matter how much Dust they've got.”

Jaune frowned. He sweeps weren't picking anything up even though he'd seen Adam go down in the area. As he continued his search, he joined the team discussion. “They aren't going to be after you. In fact, they had no idea we were going to be here: Adam brought overwhelming force out here against Humanity First—who we know have no Dust-users. Why?”

“...Because he wants to slaughter them.” Blake answered in a whisper. “He wants to make an example.”

“Right. Her's what we're going to do: I'm on Adam. Every one else, group up on the prisoners and protect them from the White Fang. Scarlet Spider, you're the one who's still got the best relationship with beacon; call them up and tell them we need bullheads to get these people out of here and into the hands of the Vale PD.”

“On it!” Ruby chirped.

“Are you sure you don't need a hand?” Pyrrha asked. “I'm almost flight capable again.”

Jaune shook his head even though she couldn't see it. “I'm sure. The Sentry is more than a match for his suit now that I've seen what he's capable of.” He wasn't really lying. If he was being completely honest, he would be openly wondering if he'd seen all of Adam's tricks—and where the hell it got the sheer electrical capacity to ionize a path long enough to strike Yang at almost sixty yards.

Nora made an unhappy sound. “Is Adam the guy that shot lightning? I wanna crack at him! He stole my thing!”
“Sorry Nora, we need everyone we can spare holding the line against the Grimm and the Fang.”

“Oh, boo.”

A chuckle escaped Jaune's lips. “I promise I'll make it up to you. And an Arc--” The canopy below him virtually exploded as what he could only describe as a tower of lightning ripped it to burning shreds. He dodged the lightning strike, but while he was trying to orient himself and blink the spots from his eyes, the Crimson Dynamo followed the thunderbolt up, slamming into him in a jet-powered tackle that carried them high into the air.

Thinking quickly, Jaune struggled to get his sword arm free. He didn't have an angle to do much damage, but he could reach the jet intakes... Raising his arm, he opened a compartment under his wrist up. Where Adam's suit stored guns and rockets, the Sentry stored tactical options—including opaque fog grenades, a modernized version of a smoke bomb that afforded even less visibility without the toxic irritation of normal smoke.

He didn't plan to use them to hide from Adam though. Instead, he didn't even arm them as he fired them into the intakes of the jet turbines. Two satisfying sounds of metal snapping and crunching later, the two metal titans stopped rising and started a rapid descent to the ground in a long arc facilitated by the maneuvering jets in the Crimson Dynamo's legs.

It was then that Jaune realized the flaw in his clever plan: Adam wasn't letting go and he was in no position to slow them with his repulsers. That thought only had a moment to go through his head before impact.

The two suits—Sentry beneath Dynamo—crashed down atop a wide, stone bridge spanning a deep rift in the forest with a great, old tower at its midpoint. The bridge shook as they struck, but as a credit to ancient engineering, did not crumble.


Maybe it was the fall, but he couldn't remember what he'd prioritized. Considering it was starting to get warm inside the Sentry suggested the air conditioning was one. He tried not to imagine how hot it would get without the extra heat sinks as he shoved Adam off him and used Guillotine to lever himself up to standing.

One more warning told him he's bent the weapon's firing rails and that attempting to use it in railgun mode might be dangerous.

Great.

Adam quickly regained his footing as well, rising to block the path back up to the forest above with his machine's body. Metallic clanging could be heard as the Crimson Dynamo ejected damaged parts and began effecting repairs to the jet engines. He drew and expanded his cleaver from his back and set the grinders in motion once more.

“Now.” the White Fang leader snarled, stepping forward slowly as if to savor the moment. “Where were we?”

Chapter End Notes
Unibeam!

In the movies, for some reason, Tony keeps referring to the Unibeam as 'Chest RT' where I guess RT is 'Repulser Tech' or something like that. No, I like Unibeam and I'm sticking with it. And yes, all of the suits have it as a desperation technique.

Also Pyrrha can make a lightsaber now. Why? Magnets!

No, seriously: in theory, if you could continually generate a plume of plasma, you could use a magnetic field to keep it focused into a very long, narrow arc hotter than the surface of the sun. It sadly would not cut through anything in one swing though, because plasma 'spashes' when it hits things unless focused on them. Hence the shallow burning 'cut'. Awesome but impractical.

I kind of feel bad for Pyrrha in this fight because it really looks like she got jobbed. But keep in mind, she's on totally unfamiliar ground: fighting in mid-air against an active damaging defense, in tandem with someone else (remember, her partner at Beacon was not a team player). So this was not her fight. Next chapter will be her fight.

Speaking of fights... I have a confession to make: I hate the Sentry.

Not the armor, the character. Well, not even the character, but what was done with him and how thanks to that, an awesome concept will never be able to be pulled off again while the original was wasted.

For those of you who don't know this character, The Sentry was a Marvel character created in the of the cycle of absolutely terrible Events that started with Avengers Disassembled and running through Siege. The idea was that The Sentry had been a Marvel Hero in the Golden and Silver Ages only to be wiped from existence in the Bronze Age. And when I say wiped from existence, I mean he ceased to be so totally that he disappeared from the comics too. Marvel actually put out some of the 'lost issues' Sentry starred in before the retcon. Plus, he's essentially Marvel's Superman. Like actually Superman in that he's not just super powerful, but an all around good person.

Not only was this a novel idea that was a lot of fun, but it was refreshing in a time that incompetent comic writers had by then been constantly spinning their wheels making character who were 'like Superman, but realistic' where realistic meant an awful person because comic writers are apparently all sociopaths.

But.. it was not to be. Turns out, The Sentry was retconed out of existence because he had an alter ego: The Void, who did equal amounts of evil to all the good Sentry did. So no, he wasn't a Marvel Superman, he was just another 'Superman is a jerk' character with different packaging.

Then they killed him.

Because the only solution modern writers have for ANYTHING is killing a character. Because basic competence and human emotion are not requirements for writers. I say this as a professional writer: we are a lazy and repetitive lot. Actual pathos takes work and most of us are not willing to develop that.
So... yeah, unlike all the other Marvel characters getting name-checked in this fic, I actually really dislike the Sentry. More maybe than even the Punisher (because he's a supervillain, not a hero and the comics don't seem to notice. No, seriously, dude is a serial killer. Dexter's got nothing on Frank).

I should probably call next chapter Catharsis.
The heavens had opened up, freely pouring sheets of rain that easily penetrated the forest canopy and turned the road into a river. Thirty-six White Fang Dust-users trudged through the mud and undergrowth toward the still running lights of the battered and scattered vehicles on the road and the Humanity First members they hoped to find there.

They represented almost everyone with an unlocked aura in the local branch of the Fang, most having had their auras less than six months. These carried basic Dust rifles stolen from the supplies of primary Hunting schools, which used them as training weapons for students who had yet to design, build or buy their own weapon so they could get used to the techniques of Dust ignition.

Six captains led them; experienced Dust-users with their own unique weapons. They led the way, intending to break up any resistance from the unexpected interlopers standing between them and Humanity First.

Leading the first squad was a heavily built cat faunus who supplemented his feline ears by growing out his auburn hair into a leonine mane. His weapon was a twenty-pound sledge hammer, which at the moment was split open to reveal a pair of ammo belts which fed the six rotating barrels that made up the hammer's shaft. Equipped with a set of infrared goggles, he motioned his squad down a slipper ridge through the woods into a position where he had a clear shot to spray the Humanity First prisoners with gunfire.

"Yah!" to his left, a squadie went down, tumbling in the mud a good ten feet before slamming into a tree with a pained sound that suggested he'd broken something. Out of the corner of the leader's eye, it looked as if he'd been pulled off his feet.

Then a flash of movement to his right, accompanied by an 'oof' and a thud. He whirled around, spotting a figure crouched on the chest of another downed squadie, planting a punch in the woman's face. Even as he brought his weapon to bear, the assailant performed a impossible leap over his head. At the same time, something latched on to the barrel of his gun and yanked it out of his hands.

The huge, heavy weapon landed in the mud with a squelch and the remaining squadies started firing. It was to no avail as the attacker dodged, rolled, contorted and jumped all over the forest to avoid the incoming fire. Then they responded not-exactly-in-kind by firing a pair of lines that caught one squadie in the chest and another by the shoulder.

With an incredibly heave, the bug-eyed attacker pulled both of them into the air and slammed them into each other, leaving them in a stunned and confused heap.

Taking the opportunity, the leonine leader retrieved his weapon and span up the barrels, opening up full-auto on the interloper, who let out a girlish shriek and sprang for the cover of the tree branches. He followed with Dust rounds, eagerly sawing through limbs and branches with gunfire.

Something like a static shock stung his ear, making him flinch and almost redirect his fire into the two stunned squadies. "I know you didn't just try to shoot at my little sis with that thing." A tiny voice said in that same ear. Taking his finger off the trigger to avoid friendly fire, he whipped around.
Absolutely nothing greeted his sight but rain and forest. Then a flare of blue and orange light nearly overwhelmed his goggles, coming from right behind him. Immediately thereafter, a huge hand closed over his head like it was a softball and he found himself being lifted off the ground and turned around to face a giant in a bug-eyed helm.

He tried to bring his weapon up, but the giant used her free hand to grab the hammer head, rip it out of his grasp, then hurl the weapon deep into the forest.

“So.” she said, still holding him in the air, “You wanna surrender, or do we get to see how far I can throw ya?”

Elsewhere, ahead of another squad, a rat fauus swished her scaly tail in anticipation as she set herself up in a prime firing position. Her weapon was a riot shield with Burn Dust elements along the front to deliver searing shield bashes, but once she was in place, she mecha-shifted it, the shield curling up into a cylinder, which she swung up onto her shoulder, flipping out a range finder and fire controls for its bazooka mode.

A cruel smile crossed her face as she sighted on on the captive Humanity First members and pressed the firing toggle.

Even as she did so, however, she noticed a shadow descending. Not on her, but into the path of her shot. As the Dust-infused rocket left the barrel, that shadow resolved into the airborne form of an Ursa, flying in from the other side of the road.

The thing managed to look downright terrified as the bazooka round slammed into it and detonated, blowing the Ursa's head and the upper portion of its right arm into a cloud of black Grimm miasma.

The rat faunus slowly lowered the weapon from her shoulder as she took in the sheer absurdity of what just happened. Her squad, fanned out around her, had to do the same. None of them was prepared when a red and gold armored figure dropped from the sky to land directly in front of their leader in a three-point stance.

She started to mecha-shift her bazooka back to shield mode, but the newcomer straightened up and in doing so delivered a powered uppercut that sent her flying up and back, smashing through a branch before striking the earth and tumbling down a muddy slope.

Her squad opened fire to avenge her, only to have their basic Dust rounds bounce off advanced armor backed by Aura. The gold and red figure raised one palm and opened fire, a blue burst blowing one Fang member off their feet as the armored figure retrieved a nagimaki from their back along with a shield.

“Thanks for blocking that shot, Nora.” Pyrrha said over the comms as she used Hanashite to sweep the legs out from under a squadie before hurling Kiku into another.

“Please don't put it into her head that she meant to do that.” Ren replied.

“I so did!”

“You couldn't even see them from here.”

“Can too! And just to prove it...”

As Pyrrha turned her attention to another squadie, she spotted the rat faunus making her way back toward her, determination in her eyes. Unfortunately for the faunus, her focus kept her from hearing the Doppler howl that preceded a beowolf sailing through the air from across the road on a
It struck her unerringly, crushing her against a tree and pinning her there with its bone spurs.

“Now say that wasn't on purpose!”

“... I'm sorry I doubted you.” Ren said after a long moment, obviously still in awe.

“Certainly glad you're on out side,” Pyrrha said lightly, shocked that this was the same woman who needed a pep talk from her just a few days earlier. She wanted to say more, but holding the line against the White Fang took priority. She switched comm channels. “Scarlet Spider? What's the ETA on Beacon responding?”

“Four minutes!” Ruby's voice called out. “Two teams of second years inbound with a teacher playing chaperone for each.”

Yang had grown to twelve feet tall and was charging into Dust fire, fists swinging and stingers arcing. “No problem! We could hold out for forty minutes without breaking a sweat!”

It was a sentiment Pyrrha couldn't argue with. Dust users or not, without support from Adam and his armor, the White Fang grunts couldn't hold a candle to any of them. But that only raised a more pressing question. Switching channels, she contacted Blake. “Control, where are the Sentry and Crimson Dynamo?”

Adam's jet engines kicked in just as he charged to add an exponential amount of force as the Crimson Dynamo plowed into the Sentry. With the air cushions on, there was almost zero friction and absolutely no traction to keep the impact from driving Jaune and his armor backward like a freight train.

He easily crossed the ancient bridge and struck the six-inch wooden door with enough force to snap it in two and rip it off its hinges with more than enough momentum left over to hit the stone stairs rising up the far wall with jaw-rattling force. The last of the supplemental heat sinks were shredded and town away in the process, leaving Jaune's vision ringed with scrolling warnings and the temperature around him to quickly rise to uncomfortable levels.

“Glynda, blow all seals in the helmet and upper body. I need to get air circulating in here.” He managed as he got the suit to standing. Just as Adam darkened the ruined door frame, he got his arms up and opened fire with all his arm-mounted repulsers.

Adam blocked with his grinder ax and trudged forward under withering fire.

“Sir, continual fire will negate an cooling you've achieved by opening the seals on the suit. I estimate twenty-seven more seconds before the environmental temperature reaches levels detrimental to your health.”

“Standing her and doing nothing's detrimental to my health too,” replied Jaune. “Blow all the seals, then divert power from all weapon systems to the Unibeam.”

Glynda made a buzzing sound. “The Unibeam is still locked out. Firing it risks severe damage to internal systems and your person.”

“Override: Charlemagne Zero-One-Four-Five Execute and then divert power to the Unibeam!”
Adam was on him now, rearing back to strike him with his weapon, grinders engaged. Jaune swung the damaged Guillotine up to block the haft of his foe's weapon and push it out of position to block just was the Unibeam fired again. The blinding beam lifted the Crimson Dynamo off its feet and blasted it through the tower's door frame, destroying it the rest of the way and sending the giant armor tumbling back across the rain-slick bridge.

The price was the air inside the Sentry seeming to boil, the heat and humidity ratcheting up to stifling as the main heat sinks tried and failed to divert the excess heat. Jaune gasped and panted like a dog in the sweltering suit, doing his best to reroute and repair what he could. Unfortunately, the critical supplementary heat sinks were simply gone—there was nothing to repair at all.

“Jaune?”

“Who the?” Cobwebs were forming in his head and he didn't recognize the voice at first. At least he had the wherewithal to close his mic to Adam before replying. “Blake?”

“Your vitals are showing you're on the verge of heat exhaustion—maybe even heat stroke. You need to break off and get somewhere where you can get out of the suit.”

He shook his head, trying to make the world more clear. “Can't.”

“What do you mean, can't? I'm reading all your mobility functions as being at least minimally operational.”

The sound of mortar crumbling interrupted their argument. Adam had returned.

Jaune made sure Blake got a good look at what he was seeing. “Exit's a little blocked,” he said, voice slurring a bit. He made ready to fire another barrage from the repulsers, but the White Fang leader launched himself forward on his jet engines and shoulder checked him into the wall, hard enough this time to wedge the Sentry's left arm into the masonry.

“Before I end you, I want you to know exactly why you're going to die, Arc.” Adam growled over the commlink.

“We didn't mean to kill all those people in Vacuo. I had no idea—“

“You think this is about the grunts that died? They're meant to die—symbols of the cause of faunus superiority willing to die for the cause. No, this is about Blake; Blake Belladonna. You killed her that day too, human. And for that, I will see recompense.”

Jaune switched channels to Blake. “Are you hearing this?”

“Yes, and it's making me sick. Does he really think I'd want to be avenged by murdering more people?”

Evidently, he did, as Adam started charging his grinders as he continued speaking. “I'd already lost her once before. It was like a miracle when she returned to us, however damaged.”

“Damaged.” Blake scoffed.

“Damaged?” Jaune echoed her, only as a question directed at Adam. He needed to stall while he tried to get free.

The White Fang leader grunted with pent-up annoyance. “She came back to us trying to push a 'kinder and gentler' White Fang. Always trying to suggest non-lethal solutions, trying to warn us
away from what she considered going too far. Spending so much time with humans made her soft. Right up to the day we took you and Nikos, she wanted to simply electrify the convoy to spare the soldiers—it was as if she no longer even understood who the enemy was.”

His grip tightened on the haft of his weapon and the grinders started to spin up, crackling with electricity.

“Jaune, I just relayed your location to Pyrrha. She's on your way, just stall,” Blake informed him.

“Wave her off.”

“What?”

Unaware of the conversation taking place on another frequency, Adam kept talking, melancholy entering his voice. “I thought she’d turned a corner while we were holding you captive. She was regaining her edge, helping me break you.” A snarl left his mouth as his armor trembled with rage. “And then you killed her!”

“Wave her off. I don't want her here. Not alone at the very least,” Jaune said, mind starting to swim. He was barely listening to Adam anymore.

“Are you insane?” Blake demanded, “you can't fight him by yourself. You're almost dead as it is.”

“She's...” Jaune trailed off, struggling to find the words. “She's the...”

Adam raised the ax over his head. “I'm not going to kill you here and now, Arc. I'm going to cripple you, then I'm going to go find your woman. I'm going to bring her here and feed her to these grinders feet first right in front of you.”

Part of Jaune wanted to tell Blake that's what he was talking about. The other part—the impulsive emotional part that suddenly found that there was little to nothing keeping it in check in his current condition—had a much more visceral response.

With a howl of unmitigated rage, he raised his free arm, which was still holding Guillotine, and whipped it around to smash the dulled blade against Adam's neck. It did absolutely nothing, but he still triggered the shift that put the damaged weapon into rail gun mode.

Adam laughed. “What did you expect that to do?”

“Nothing.” Jaune snarled, breathing hard in the impossible soup that was now the interior of the Sentry suit. Warnings of catastrophic failure of the Guillotine if he fired it scrolled and flashed before his eyes. “It's broken.” Nonetheless, he fired the railgun—whose nearly destroyed rails exploded at the speed of sound when the tungsten spike struck them.

The shards of metal blasted everywhere, especially into the side of the Crimson Dynamo's head. The shrapnel didn't penetrate, but they did destroy the sensors along the side of his head. Shocked, Adam stumbled back, giving Jaune room and leverage to drop the remains of Guillotine, press his free hand to the wall, and fire all repulsers, jerking his trapped arm free of the wall.

Now released, the enraged part of Jaune he rarely let off the chain took over, raining a steady stream of blows into the Crimson Dynamo with all the strength and ferocity he was worth. With heat exhaustion closing in hard and exacerbated by all his sudden motion, it didn't last long however.

Adam managed to step back and swing the flat of the grinder ax into the Sentry, knocking him onto
his back with a mighty clang.

Fury mounting within him, Adam stomped on his fallen foe and raised his weapon. “I figure you'll still live just long enough without your legs.” He started to swing, but his ax was engulfed in a field of black energy and wrested from his grip, flying backward out of the tower's busted door and into the rain.

Jaune completely forgotten, Adam turned to see where his weapon had gone, finding a figure standing on the bridge, one hand extended as his ax planted itself forcefully into the surface of the bridge grinders first.

“I heard you were looking for me, Taurus.” The speakers on the Hematite suit distorted Pyrrha's voice, by amplified it so that she was easily heard over the roar of falling rain.

Adam didn't answer, revving his jet engines and throwing himself into another full-power charge.

Only this time his opponent wasn't another large, bulky armor, but one with a more human range of motion and reaction time. Pyrrha met his charge by dashing forward herself only to drop into a roll under his leading shoulder just before impact. Adam passed right over her as she came up in a kneeling position behind him, grasping his ax with her semblance and slamming it into his back.

The Crimson Dynamo was too heavy for her to move on her own without supreme concentration, but using his own momentum against him, she drove him the entire length of the bridge, tumbling end over end in an uncontrolled somersault.

Adam recovered quickly rolling to his feet even in the bulky armor with the help of the jet engines. Extending his arms, he charged his capacitors and prepared to fire his primary weapon. To his confusion, he sighted in on her flying away—and something pink dropping into his path as if to block for her.

No matter, he thought, his weapon was more than powerful enough to tear through the lightly armored woman wielding a hammer who just landed in front of him with more than enough juice to take out the Hematite armor. Locking on, he let loose with a colossal bolt of electricity that streaked out into the night.

The brilliance briefly illuminated the smiling face of Nora Valkyrie as she leveled her hammer into the path of the bolt, directing the full charge into herself. Light erupted from the Odindottir, arcs of electricity playing all across her body and up and down the length of Magnhild.

“Thanks!” She called boisterously. “For that, I'm only gonna break your legs a little!”

There was not time to react. Like the lightning itself, Nora closed the distance to Adam between blinks, her hammer swinging out with an explosive impact that annihilated the Crimson Dynamo's right foot and ankle, breaking Adam's foot in the process.

That was enough to make him realize he was out matched. Firing his jet engines, he took off, only for Nora to match speed and altitude, coming up behind him to land another mighty blow on his armor's back. The protective casing over the Shock crystal spat sparks, but the hammer absorbed them even as it crushed the plates like eggshells.

The glittering, crackling crystal fell from the armor, leaving Adam with only battery power to continue on.

Not that Nora intended to let him go. She looped around, aiming for the other leg, only for Pyrrha's voice to bring her up short.
“Nora? I need you back at the tower. We have to get Jaune and his armor out of her before the whole place collapses.”

The Valkyrie glanced back at the tower in the distance, then the escaping White Fang leader and sighed. “Next time,” she muttered, shaking a fist that Adam Taurus before turned back for the tower to help her new friend.

Chapter End Notes

So yeah, like I said, I am not fond of the Sentry so it was a pleasure to destroy the suit.

Also, several people were upset that people were mean to Jaune... they hadn't seen anything yet.

Speaking of which: I understand while people have issues with that, but I stand by what I'm doing and will just say your patience will be rewarded. Especially with Gris, as soon as next chapter. If you've got issues with how Yang acts with him though, I don't know what to say, seeing as she's like this with everyone in canon and I love her for it. Some friends are just okay acting that way with each other.

Moving on from that, it took me a while to decide how to do this fight. I knew Jaune needed to lose his second fight for character development, but how to do it was the question. In the end, I decided to make his loss more a function of his insecurities (the over-built suit with too many points of failure) while making it unclear whether he could have won in a more fair fight.

Adam escaped because it just felt wrong not to have Blake be the one to stop him for good. Originally, Nora straight up broke his legs and grounded him by overloading his suit.

This is the end of the Ambush arc, but there's a bit more of the fight, but there's a few scenes to show in flashback that were originally in this (much longer) chapter. Namely the arrival of teams GREY and TEAK (led by Marigold Thrush, younger sister of Russell) along with my personal favorite teachers Ooblek and Port. That'll show up later, I'm sure.

Next chapter, Jaune recovers, some fences are mended, and evil is once more on the march toward its endgame. Read it all in: Convalesce.
Jaune woke up to darkness and flailed about trying to get the Sentry back online. His body was heavy, his head pounded, and absolutely nothing in the suit around him seemed to be responding. There wasn't even any resistance from the hand controls even as he opened and closed his fists with all his strength.

The only feeling that came back seemed to by a pinching sensation in his arm.

"Whoa there. Hold still or you're going to break the needle off in your arm."

Blake?

Not exactly the voice he was hoping to hear in his ear, but considering she wasn't being broadcast over a comm, he was able to suss out that he wasn't wearing his helmet and by extension the suit. Things weren't dark because the suit was offline, but because there was something over his face.

Reaching up, he removed a thin, moist cloth from his forehead and eyes and groaned at the realization that he hadn't even noticed the cold compress until that moment.

The world was blurry, but he easily made out the black and white shape Blake Belladonna leaning over him, holding his right arm steady with one hand as the other slowly and carefully pulled an IV needle from the other.

“What happened?” His voice came out raspy and rough.

“Well, objectively your team won. The entire Vale chapter of Humanity First and nearly forty members of the White Fang captured without a single fatality. On the other hand... how do I put this? You lost to Adam because your heat sinks failed and you gave yourself heat exhaustion fighting from inside an oven. Pyrrha and Nora managed to make Adam with draw, but...”

“He's still out there,” Jaune concluded. “At least no one else was hurt... right?” Blake—or the Blake-shaped blob—nodded. “Good. And... sorry. I thought if I held out just a little longer I could figure out a way to beat him.”

The Blake-blob, which was slowly gaining a more defined form, shook its head. “You have nothing to apologize to me about. If anything, both you and Pyrrha have been more accommodating to my presence than I had any right to expect. I'm really the one that should be apologizing to you, letting Yang foist me on you like that.”

Now it was Jaune's turn to shake his head. He tried to sit up, but somehow failed. “No, and I don't expect one from Yang either. Like it or not, we're both part of her family and all she really wants is to have her family together. I'm sure you know about her mom, so it makes sense that she'd be desperate to keep us all close.” Finally managing to sit up with some effort, he added, “Believe me, I know how that feels.”

His sight was now clear enough for him to see Blake blink. “Really.” It was kind of a question, but more of an accusatory statement.

“Huh?”
Seeing his honest confusion, Blake's expression softened. “I talked to your sister the other day when we were supposed to go spar. She told me more than I really have any right to know about what went on with your family. But also that every time they tried to contact you, your secretary turned them away, saying you were too busy.”

“Um... yeah, I'm going to have to go with 'huh' again. I don't have a secretary, I have Glynda. And before that, Cinder's office handled all my calls. And neither of them would have turned my mother or sisters away.”

“That's not encouraging,” Blake said, cats ears drooping, “Who could have done it then?”

“I don't know. But once I'm able to, I'm going to find out.” He grunted and tried to get into a better sitting position. “I've got options to do that now. Ruby has a friend who can pull my family's phone records and find out who they ended up talking to.”

Blake nodded. “Right. Until then, maybe you should talk to her and tell her about this. She's here at the compound; pretty torn up about you being hurt even if it was just eat exhaustion. Pyrrha's keeping an eye on her—I figured they could distract each other while I got you back on your feet.”

At this pronouncement, Jaune frowned. “Hey: why did I even need to be tended to for that anyway? Don't I have Aura for that?”

This made the faunus woman snort. “Congratulations on finding one of the things Aura can't heal. It can fix damage, but it can't change your core temperature or re-hydrate you. Trust me, Weiss and I were the members of RWBY who had the most field medicine training and Yang more or less ended up giving us an extensive hands-on experience with every kind of over-exertion.”

She stepped back from the bed. “Now I'll get Pyrrha and your sister for you. I promise I'll be out of your life by tonight.”

“Wait.” Jaune's voice stopped her after only a few steps.

Her ears flicked in a catlike sign of wariness and possibly irritability. “Hmm?”

“Look... I misjudged you. As much as you said Pyrrha and I have been accommodating to you, I haven't been. It's not because you were rough with me and Pyrrha though. Well mostly not about that. Before tonight—is it even tonight?”

“It's actually tomorrow morning for you, but go on.”

“Huh. Anyway, I thought you just stood by and let the White Fang do all those horrible things, putting keeping your cover ahead of all the people who were hurt. From what Adam said during our fight... now I know that's not the case. You did everything in your power to keep all that from happening even if it didn't work out.”

He took a deep breath. “I respect that. More than respect that. And that's why—pending Pyrrha being okay with it, since... you know, you threatened her with a sword—I'm asking you to be on the team.”

Blake's ears twitched in a manner he couldn't read and she ducked her head. “I'll thank about it. But thank you for even giving me a chance all things considered.” She didn't give him time to reply before gliding out of the room.

It took about ten minutes for the door to what Jaune was slowly coming to realize was one of the guest rooms at the Arc Compound opened and a light breeze preceded Gris with Pyrrha not far
behind.

The moment his younger sister got a sense of where he was, she exploded forward on a column of wind, immediately knocking all the breath out of Jaune as she impacted him and crushed him in a huge hug at the same time. Pyrrha gave the siblings a fond look and closed the door behind her, more than willing to let them have their long overdue moment.

“Jaune! Dust, are you okay?” Gris was trying her hardest not to cry. “When Pyrrha and the hammer girl flew off after you, I had no idea what was going on. I thought you might have...” She gulped back a lump in her throat. “After all the stuff I said to you...and...and I'm sorry, okay? I'm really sorry!”

Returning the embrace, Jaune tried to parse what she was trying to say. “I-it's okay, Gris. It's alright. I just kind of overdid it is all. Wait... you were there?”

She nodded against his shoulder, but by then couldn't form the words.

“Team GRAY was one of the two teams Beacon sent to mop up.” Pyrrha interjected softly, then smiled fondly, “They comported themselves grandly.”

Jaune gave her a grateful look over his sister's shoulder and continued holding the girl as she vented her fear and frustration. After a short while, Gris's breath started to regulate and he finally thought it was safe to ask the question that had been burning within him since speaking with Blake.

“Gris?”

She sniffed and pulled away, the look she was giving him in that moment reminding him of a time long ago when he'd tried teaching her to ride a bike and she ended up skinning both elbows. “Yeah?”

“You told Blake that you and Mom and the others got turned away by my secretary when you tried to call in the past?”

Gris stiffened as anger surged and warred with guilt and fear. “Not just when we called. About a week after I first got into Beacon, I actually when to the Arc Industries building in Vale and demanded to see you. The same b—woman—we usually got routed to called security on me and had me thrown out!”

“Why didn't you bring that up when you were throwing me against the wall before?”

At this question, Gris shied away with a scowl. “Because I especially hate thinking about that. I really didn't want to believe you'd even do that.”

“Well... yeah.” Jaune reached out and put his hand on her shoulder. “Gris, I don't even have a secretary. Pyrrha's my assistant, but I'd never call her my secretary—and you'd definitely recognize her voice, right?”

Gris nodded. “Y-yeah, obviously. And I recognize this woman anywhere. All growly and kinda sultry—makes you feel like you're being hunted but you don't know for what.”

Something in the back of Jaune's mind stuck on that point and held even more fast when her heard Pyrrha give a little gasp as the same possibility must have struck her. They made eye contact.

While it was true Cinder fit the mold, why would she do it? Hell, even if she did want to keep him from reconnecting with his family, why would she do it personally when she had her own personal
toadies following her everywhere and the whole of Arc Industries to set to the task besides?

He shook his head at the same time Pyrrha did.

Couldn't be...

Instead of following that particular rabbit hole, he choose to reach up and tousle Gris's hair. “Look, rest assured, I never would have turned you away. And I'm going to get to the bottom of this, you have my word.”

“And an Arc always keeps their word.” Gris said almost automatically. “Well... except that one time...”

Jaune sighed. “Yeah, well probably way more than that. We're a pretty big family after all. That's the other thing though: I think it's time to put an end to this whole stupid thing I started way back then. Is Blanche still in town?”

“Yeah, until the end of the week. Marron can't run the forge alone and Mom and Dad have enough trouble with Vert these days as it is so...”

“Well they'll have a little more help for a few days soon. I need you to call her and tell her the news: as soon as I take care of a few things with the team, I'm going home.”

Gris started at the news. “What? For real? But Dad...”

“...Was still doing what he thought was right.” Jaune said, feeling strange to admit it out loud. “And it's time I acknowledge that.”

“Are you sure? I mean like I said, I understand why you're mad at him. Considering what our family stands for...”

Jaune waved off the rest of that sentence. “Something about almost cooking yourself to death in a fit of hubris changes your priorities just a little. You'll understand when you're older.”

This made Gris sit back and raise an eyebrow. ‘I've been at the end of so many 'you'll understand when you're older' speeches and that might be the weirdest.” Then she shrugged. “But if you're willing to forgive him I guess I'm not going to argue with you.”

Once more, Jaune tousled her hair. “Thanks for the support.” Then he glanced in Pyrrha's direction. “Um... actually, can you give us a minute, Gris? If I'm going to be heading home, I think Pyrrha deserves to finally hear why all this happened.

Gris glanced over her shoulder at her brother's girlfriend before looking at him again. “You think she'll understand our Arc Logic?”

He smiled at his sister. “He's been putting up with Arc Logic for three years now and hasn't cracked. I'm sure she'll be fine. And even if she doesn't? That's not the point: she deserves to know. That's also Arc Logic.”

To this, Gris gave a sharp nod and crawled off the bed. “Yeah, that's true. I'll see you after you two talk then.” One her way out, she paused next to Pyrrha and said quietly, “Thanks.”

“Oh, you're very welcome.” Pyrrha said, giving a little wave to Gris as she left.

“What was that about?”
“Oh,” Pyrrha said, coming over to his bedside. “Things a little awkward while we were waiting for you to wake up and she ended up asking me for some advice about a boy. Granted, I had to admit I was still pretty much clueless even if you and I are together now, but it was a good talk.”

Jaune raised an eyebrow even as he scooted over in the bed and patted the vacated spot. “This boy wouldn't happen to be a certain raccoon faunus would it?”

Gladly accepting the spot on the bed, Pyrrha quickly sidled up beside him, giving a coy smile. “I have been sworn to secrecy.” That said, she pretended to zip her lips.

Wrapping an arm around her, Jaune leaned into Pyrrha. “I guess I'll have to respect that. Even thought they would be really cute together. Then again, I don't even know if Beacon's okay with partners dating.”

Pyrrha shrugged. “It's not exactly discouraged, but it never came up with my team obviously.” She put her own arm around him. “Which worked out pretty well, actually.” They sat there for a few moments, just enjoying each other's company before... “So... I'll give you an out here: you can either tell me what happened with your father, or we can get to that long-ignored discussion we were supposed to have about suicidal plans and warning people before we undertake them.”

“In my defense, this plan became increasingly more suicidal as it went along.” Jaune pointed out, “But no, I don't need an out here. Like I said, you deserve to know the truth of what my father did that caused me to leave home and have such a terrible relationship with the family.

“I guess we have to start with a few things you might not know about the Arc family...”

Chapter End Notes

Aaaand cliffhanger.

You know, one of the more frustrating things about writing long form fiction is that sometimes readers become frustrated or annoyed by elements that serve a purpose that you know will be important an resolved in the future, but you can't tell them without spoiling things.

So I hope that the people who were bothered by Gris's attitude and some of the treatment of Jaune get it now. There was more, but I needed to draw it out because Cinder was involved and Jaune is going to start putting things together once he realizes she's been purposefully isolating him.

And to a lesser extent, I hope I explained in a more sympathetic light why Yang was so desperate to get Blake on the team even if it was over Jaune's head.

I understand and sympathize with people who had issues with that, even the ones who feel this wasn't satisfactory, but I do hope you appreciate that I did have a plan and logical reasons for what I was doing.

On a lighter note, this leads into a short series of flashback stories before we go meet the Arcs and then are off to my second-most awaited fight (and the second to last) Rise of Fin Fang Foom.
Ten Years Ago...

It was hard to write in his room. Jaune had know that for years: the dull red glow that came through his window from the forge across the yard managed to tint even the strongest light in the room red day or night. The Arc children did all their homework downstairs in the living room or in the room of a sibling who was lucky enough to have a view of the fields instead.

But Jaune Arc had to write in his room now because he had a secret to keep. A secret that was threatened moments later when a gentle but booming knock resounded on his door.

“J-just a minute!” Jaune scrambled, gathering the papers on his bed together and hastily stuffing them under his pillow. Then, just for the sake of plausible deniability, he reached into his nightstand and pulled out a dirty magazine, pushing it sloppily under his bed. “C-come in!”

The door opened to admit Leon Arc. He was a tall man with broad shoulders. An old goldenrod jacket, formerly part of his Hunter's uniform, concealed a body that was still powerful despite his age and affliction. An ebony cane topped with an ivory handle in the shape of a lion's head bearing the double golden arc of the Arc family crest bore witness to the injury that ended his career.

All the Arc children knew the story: how a very old Beowolf Alpha lured his team into a tangled forest where its pack was able to surround them. And of how said Alpha, in its death throes, managed to hurl Leon into a tree so hard that with his combat-weakened Aura, his leg had been so badly broken that field medicine couldn't set it so it healed properly.

Despite sun and forge-baked leather skin, he had a kind face behind the long, blonde mustaches that hung almost down to his chest. The look on that face as he entered was one of world weariness and deep concern. To his son, it looked like his father was going to face the gallows.

“Dad?” he asked despite himself.

Leon signed and gestured to the bed, asking permission to sit. When Jaune nodded, he sat down with a sigh and a groan. “Son, Matte showed me something she got in the mail today.”

Jaune flinched visibly. The twins, Matte and Ciel were always looking for ways to tattle on their siblings and get some positive attention from their parents. He should have checked to see who went to get the mail every day until he was sure what he'd been expecting arrived.

Just as he feared, his father produced a slightly rumpled envelope and unfolded it to reveal the easily recognizable crest of Haven Academy in Mistral. Leon just stared, dead-eyed at the crest for a long moment before speaking. “This is a response letter from Haven. Now... unless something's changed since the last time I knew, they don't send these out unsolicited. Someone's got to send them an application first.”

“Dad...” Jaune started.

“I thought we talked about this.” The tone hadn't become any more sharp, but the words still stopped Jaune short. “Maybe you were too young for the full explanation back when you wanted to go to a primary combat school, but we made it clear that your mother and I didn't want you
becoming a Hunter.”

“But Dad, you don't understand—”

Leon silence him with a mere shake of his head. “Jaune, you know I how much I love what I did for a living and how much I respect the people still doing it, so it should go to show you just how important it must be to me that you not follow in my footsteps. Please son, give this up.”

It was usually at this point in a discussion with his father that Jaune backed down. He wasn't the confrontational type and he'd fade away to come up with a better argument or deciding that it wasn't worth it after a quick exchange. The general lack of steel in the boy's spine helped make his parent's choice to keep him away from all things Hunter-related all the easier. It took will to get through training alive, much less as a success. Or alive.

So it made them feel they were also saving his life.

Only this time Jaune Arc, normally a human doormat, didn't back down. Instead, he practically exploded.

“I've heard all this before dad! All the half-explanations and 'this is important's without any good reason. I don't actually know anything, so how am I supposed to understand? What I know is the Uncle Braun died and you're not going to have any more kids so I'm the last male Arc. I know that, okay? And I know that for whatever reason, only a male Arc can wield Crocea Mors, right?”

Tentatively, Leon nodded.

“Yeah, well I don't even know that that means! I guess it might be important since it's enough to kill my dream, but I known nothing. But I do know this, Dad: what's the point of having Crocea Mors at all if no one's going to use it? What if I only have one son too? Should I never let him learn how to be a Hunter either? What if he never has more than one son either? Are we all supposed to be incompetent caretakers?”

He turned to his father, eyes stinging. “I don't want to be useless anymore Dad. I want to be out there helping people, protecting them.”

Put off guard by his son's emotional outburst, Leon foundered a bit. “Y-you aren't useless. The twins say you've always been a big help in the fields and with the animals. And if you don't like that, there's always running for forge or the business side of things...”

“Great,” Jaune muttered, collapsing into himself, “So I can be a farmer or something.”

“I'll have you know that farmers are essential to the Kingdoms, my boy. It's a noble profession and —”

Now it was Jaune's turn to cut Leon off. “But it's not what I want! Dad, I grew up hearing all the stories about you and grandpa and great grandpa. You left out all the nuts and bolts, but it was enough. This is what I want to do and... please Dad, don't take this from me.”

There was a long silence as Leon let that all sink in.

It wasn't as if he was just trying to protect his family name or blood legacy. If Ozpin was right, Crocea Mors and its hidden power might well become a key to saving all of Remnant one day. Though given the number of near-apocalypses the man was privy to, that might just be the Law of Averages kicking in. Regardless, was it really fair to sunder his own son's dreams and, as Jaune said, turn him into a caretaker against his will?
He almost crumpled the envelope into his fist. But in doing so, he came to a realization that might redeem his actions. “You're right... in a way. I have no right to take that away from you, Jaune, but you have to accept that it may be too late now. The kids applying to the Hunting Academies have had four years of primary combat school under their belts. You've had no training at all.”

“I've trained on my own some.” Jaune offered, scratching the back of his head sheepishly. “A little. You know, alone. In the barn. Mostly. I am deadly with a crowbar and a trashcan lid.”

Leon reached over and ruffled the young man's head. “It's going to take a bit more than that, son. That's why they usually want transcripts unless you have a stellar recommendation.”

“But I wrote a really killer essay?”

“Well, maybe that's enough,” Leon said, faking optimism and holding up the envelope.

Jaune hung his head muttering, “It wasn't enough for Atlas or Shade.”

Leon frowned. “You applied to all the schools?”

“Except Beacon. I figured I had no hope getting in there anyway. Plus it's so close to home, it wouldn't be too hard for you and Mom to track me down and drag me home the second you found out. But after the first two rejections, I decided I might as well take my chances everywhere so...”

He reached under his pillow and pulled out the Beacon application.

While Jaune hadn't said it, the inference now became clear to Leon: his only son had been planning to run away to become a Hunter. And he'd been afraid that he'd force him to come back once he found out. At the same time, it both confirmed Jaune's steadfastness in his pursuit of becoming a Hunter and the certainty he'd inadvertently instilled in the boy that he would stop at nothing to destroy his happiness.

It was a painful thought for a man who, until then, thought he'd been a model father.

He cleared his throat. “Well let's see what Haven has to say before you go through all the work applying to Beacon.” It was a formality, but one he thought was necessary to keep his son's spirits up. He tore open the letter and pulled out the single folded sheet. It took an effort to look sure of himself as he unfolded it and read.

“Dear Mr. Jaune Arc. Thank you for your interest in the prestigious Haven Academy for Hunters. As you know, Haven limits each class of future huntsmen to ensure that each student has access to the optimal amount of attention and resources... I'm just going to skip ahead to... oh. There it is.”

Leon finally let his face fall. “Unfortunately, your application has been rejected due to a lack of transcripts from an accredited primary training facility or letter of recommendation from an established person of merit. Please feel free to...”

Leon felt himself running out of energy just reading that part. “…apply next year. I'm sorry, son.”

Jaune's shoulders slumped. “I didn't really have my hopes up anymore anyway.” He gazed down sadly at the Beacon application. “Might as well throw this one away.”

He started crumple the paper only to find his father's hands taking it from him. Blue eyes goggled in shock at a sight he never expected.

“I wouldn't say that,” Leon said, looking down at his boy with compassion. All illusions of trying to hide away the legacy of the male Arc bloodline had been burned away by the sight of his son so utterly crushed by his own actions.
This change in demeanor was lost on Jaune, whose mood has sunk to rock bottom and deployed the drills. “What's the point? It's like you said: I don't have transcripts and I don't have a recommendation. I... I guess it's time to find a new dream. Blanche said I might have a knack with the machines in the forge. I could be, like a handyman or something.”

Leon put his hand on his son's shoulder. “Who says you don't have a referral? Especially with Beacon. I know you've listened to my stories enough to know the Arcs were instrumental in founding the school and I myself was pretty well sought after guest speaker. A letter from me and Ozpin will admit you, no questions asked.”

For a brief moment, Jaune's eyes lit up. Then that fire dimmed and faded away. “I-I'd love to, Dad, but I don't think that's the right way. I mean, if I just got in normally and I wasn't good enough, they'd send me home, right?”

“Yes...” Leon said, not following the logic.

“Yeah, well someone more deserving would take my place. But if someone important tells them to admit me, well then they might not be so keen on just kicking me out because they won't want to offend you or tell you were wrong.”

Now Leon's eyebrows were creasing. “So... you want to be kicked out?”

Jaune took a long, deep breath through his nose before nodding. “If I'm really not cut out for it, yes. Dad, all I really want is a shot and a chance to help people. If it turns out that the best way I can help people is to step aside so someone better at doing that can take my place…” He gave a mournful look at the application in his father's hands, knowing that the chances were very good he was condemning his dream to the boneyard with his next words, but knowing it was the right thing to do. It was the kind of action an Arc faced with a placid smile and a straight back. “…then I'll gladly accept that.”

Pride swelled in Leon's chest. True, the best, most logical means tot hat end would be to give up, but it took courage for his son to reject the easier path for the path that did the most good for others. All he wanted was a chance, and Leon knew he could provide that... only his one option was the very one Jaune was rejecting.

Luckily (for the moment, as time would tell), Leon Arc was well known for being a quick thinker when things really mattered. It was the source of his celebrated tactical prowess. He quickly assembled an idea. It would require lying to his child, something he never imagined having to do at such an extreme, but he justified it because it would serve to allow that same child a chance at his life's goal. “That's a fine attitude, m'boy. One truly worthy of the title of Huntsman. If you don't want to use the family name, then we won't. Unfortunately, that leaves us with a less than honest option.”

At this pronouncement, Jaune became unsure once more. “Just... how dishonest are we talking here?”

Again, Leon thought fast, concocting a story entirely on the fly. “Well you see, I know a former student from beacon who ultimately failed to follow the traditional calling of the Hunter named Roman Torchwick. A sad tale really, but a boon to us, as he turned to a life of crime. I may be able to convince him to forge a set of glowing transcripts for you that could get you into Beacon.”

For the first time ever he regretted being responsible for getting Third Year Hunter-In-Training Torchwick expelled from Beacon. If he hadn't earned the now criminal mastermind's eternal enmity, he probably could ask the man for help obtaining fake transcripts.
Jaune perked up again, but looked guilty about it. “R-really?”

“I'm pretty sure I can swing it.” Leon boldly lied.

A suspicious look crossed the younger Arc's face. “And you promise you won't get me in using the family name?’

Leon suppressed a cringed. Of course the boy had to put it that way. It hurt his family pride to do so, but he nodded for Jaune's sake. “I promise.”

“And an Arc always keeps his promises.” Jaune quickly completed the familial oath, obliviously driving a stake into his father's heart.

RWBYRWBYRWBY

“And you know the worst part?” Jaune asked, still on the guest bed, holding and being held by Pyrrha. “I might have gone on to Beacon and never found any of it out if I hadn't gotten onto the wrong airship the day everyone was supposed to arrive at Beacon. Mine landed in Vale instead of up the cliff and while I was waiting for a bullhead, I ducked into this club and who do I run into? Torchwick.

“I heard someone call him by name and, like some idiot, I went up to thank him for what he'd done. The second I mentioned my father's name? He laughed right in my face. I felt like such a boob. And worse than that, my father, the man I idolized more than anyone else in the world... broke his promise to me. Lied right to my face. I... just never left Vale. I got hired on with Advanced Idea Mechanics, and within six months, Cinder 'discovered' me. I've been avoiding having to talk to him... or about him ever since.”

Pyrrha pulled him closer as he concluded his story. “Oh Jaune. After seeing how much you care about your family honor and history, I understand why it bothered you so much, but almost ten years?”

“I know,” he replied with a sigh. “I let all this go too far, hurt the whole family in the process... I think you'll agree it's way past time for me to put an end to this. That's why I'm going home for a little while.” He hesitated a moment. “I don't suppose you might want to...”

Pyrrha pulled away far enough to give him a look. “Jaune Arc, if you think you even have to ask me to come with you for moral support, I think you're forgetting who you're talking to.” She raised a hand to cup his cheek and drew his face closer to hers. “So allow me to remind you.”

Chapter End Notes

So one of my many complaints about Vol 3 was the dissolution of plot threads, both created in that volume and previously. One of those was the matter of Jaune's transcripts. Please, please, please don't PM me or use a review to try and justify this: I'm not looking for excuses. It's just a missed opportunity to explore this aspect of his character whether or not people think he's proven himself at this point. I was really fascinated about how he goth them and how much Ozpin knew and now there's really no consequence (remember how people keep using that to justify the back third of Vol 3?) to them since Beacon is gone.
So for Arc Reaction, I actually tied my personal headcanon about where Jaune got them (ie: he didn't but thinks he did) to the bulletpoint that led to this AU. If Jaune hadn't gotten on the wrong transport and Nora hadn't been 'rescued', we'd be in the main series universe.

Speaking of headcanons, Torchwick's past involving Hunter training. Okay, so clearly, training is available outside the proper channels, but a classy guy like Torchy? That's the kind of smug you only get coming from privilege.

But enough rant, let's talk about this chapter. So here's the big reveal. As I've been alluding to, it's not a big deal for most people but it meant a LOT to Jaune. Actually presenting it was a nightmare because it's difficult to write a melancholy Jaune in character; he's completely bereft of the comedy beats that make up some of his more enjoyable qualities, so I had to go back and spot weld some moments of levity in. This is a fun fic, after all.

By the way, I'm going to mention it because it did take me some effort: I am still following the naming rules. Leon mean Lion, which in heraldry is related to the colors gold and red. Leon wears a goldenrod coat (speaking of which, it's kind of weird the Jaune is the only character who doesn't really wear his 'color'. Something I considered playing with, namely that 'Jaune' might not be his real name.).

The sisters we've seen so far are:

Blanche – White

Matte and Claire – Opaque and Clear respectively.

Marron – Brown

Gris – Gray

Vert – Green

As you can see, I've gotten more creative with the names as I go along. Vert? What was I thinking?
It took all of her social training to keep Weiss from fidgeting nervously as she rode the elevator up to her father's office at the Schnee Dust Company's main office in the heart of Atlas. Though she was alone, she knew for a fact that one was never really alone in an SDC building. There were cameras everywhere, and plenty of people—her own father included—might be watching her looking for any signs of weakness or dissent.

What worried her today was that it had taken her father a whole week to summon her after they separated in Vale. Weiss of course got into contact with her sister that very night before Team RWBY’s reunion with Blake to make sure her family had gotten out okay, but her father hadn't replied to any of the messages she'd left, not from that morning when she left for Atlas and no since her return.

It didn't take a genius like herself to know he was very cross with her. She intended to spin standing with her friends against the Juggernaut as making sure the man-turned-monster didn't threaten her family as well as doing her best to gain intel on his origins. She just couldn't decide whether it would work or not, especially given the seven-day silent treatment.

The other thing that nagged at her was the fact that her father hadn't made a move against Arc Industries yet. True to her word, she'd had every intention of trying to convince him to soften the blow, but in a week of no communication, she'd fully expected him to have razed everything Jaune had created to the ground.

And yet... nothing.

That could only mean that something was taking priority over putting someone 'in their place', as Wilhelm Schnee would say. Her mind reeled wondering what that could be.

When the elevator dinged upon reaching the top floor, Weiss almost ran into the man himself as the doors opened. He'd clearly been waiting there since getting the notification that his daughter had arrived.

He held up a hand to stop her from exiting and instead stepped aboard beside her. Not a single word escaped his lips until the doors were closed. Then, retrieving a key from the inside pocket of his jacket, her fitted it into the elevator's control panel and turned it, causing a second, concealed panel to open.

"It's good to see you made it hope from Vale, Weiss," he said with an even tone as she touched a sequence of controls in the hidden panel. The elevator began a slow, steady descent.

"Thank you, Father. It's good to see you was well." Weiss kept her eyes forward, her tone respectful. "I have some things to report that you might be interested in."

Wilhelm grunted. "We have a long way down. Let's hear it."

Taking just a moment to steady herself, Weiss nodded. "There is another faction in Vale we didn't know about. They arrived after the Juggernaut was defeated to take him into custody. They aren't a minor organization either: they have impressive resources, lots of personnel and apparent police powers seeing as they were able to contain the area of the battle without police interference."
“Interesting. We'll have to take a closer look into this group. What else do you know about them?”

Here Weiss's nerves felt like she was going to shiver out of her skin as she contemplated something she feared being caught doing more than anything else: Lying to her father. It wasn't like she had a lot of choice in the matter: Wilhlem would do whatever it took to get the information her wanted, and if he knew the truth, that would include using his influence in the military to strong-arm Ruby.

“Not a great deal I'm afraid. We were detained for a short period and released with an admonishment not to discuss the Juggernaut with anyone. I can draw a few conclusions however.”

“Let's hear them.”

Weiss nodded, careful not to sigh in relief that she'd managed to lie without detection. “Their personnel appear to all be Hunter-trained or some equivalent thereof. All of their equipment from weapons to their custom bullheads are top of the line. A princely sum had gone into establishing and maintaining this organization to say the least.

“Moreover, I heard them speaking about the Juggernaut as if it were supernatural rather than someone using their Semblance or Dust to achieve the effect. Obviously they believe they're fighting some otherworldly threat and are equipped for it however delusional they might be.”

She put just a hint of condescending laughter in her voice at the end there. That night had made a believe in the supernatural out of her, but as far as her father knew, she believed nothing of the sort, so she had to play it that way.

But she was not prepared to see Wilhelm Schnee, the unflappable man behind almost everything going on in Atlas flinch. It was like watching a stone edifice break down into tears it was so unnerving to her. It lasted only a moment before he composed himself, but in that moment, it also struck Weiss like an Ursa in full charge that her father knew about the supernatural too.

Before she could ponder that further, Wilhelm spoke, unashamedly changing the subject. “Have you been following the other news out of Vale? Sienna Crossroads? The Emerald Forest incident the other night?”

Weiss's heart all but stopped. But even that couldn't keep her social programmed from kicking in and forcing her to speak. “I saw the reports on the news. Do you think these new Hunters in powered armor are related to what we were just discussing?”

“It's possible, but it is just as possible that they're part of some new military program that Vale is developing.”

“Do you believe Vale is breaking the Vytal treaty?” Weiss asked, suddenly worried about the implications of that. According to the Vytal treaty the four kingdoms were each given a very specific role to ensure all of humanity was sharing the burden of surviving on Remnant evenly. Atlas provided for the common defense and fielded military might to defend the kingdoms from criminals, gangs, hostile nomads and Grimm incursions too large for Hunters alone to turn back. No other kingdom was to have more than a self-defense force.

If Vale, tasked to be the bread bowl of the world, producing the vast majority of food, was trying its hand at an advanced weapon, it could be seen as a breach of the Vytal treaty and inspire other kingdoms to arm themselves as well. It could start the world on the road to war.

The exact opposite of what Jaune and Pyrrha ha set out to do, Weiss noted bitterly. Her fears were confirmed by her father a moment later.
“We have to consider that possibility and prepare to formulate the appropriate reply.” For the first
time since entering the elevator, Wilhelm turned to look at Weiss. “Weiss, you love your family
and your kingdom, correct?”

Social skills be damned, Weiss sputtered at that. “Of course I do, Father. Everything I've done has
been for one or the other!”

Wilhelm nodded, the slight upturn of his lips that passed for a smile from him telling her she's said
the right thing. “As have I.” The elevator began to slow. “And your loyalty is why I believe you're
the perfect candidate for our counter whatever it is Vale is doing.”

“Candidate?” There was nothing about that word in this context that Weiss liked.

Wilhelm gave one of those laughs he used at business luncheons. “It will be easier just to show
you.” He'd timed his comment perfectly, as the second he finished talking, the elevator doors
opened onto a floor Weiss had never seen before.

They stepped out onto a gantry overlooking what appeared to be a factory floor. Unmoving
assembly lines stood in four straight rows leading back to he far wall. Robotic line worked moved
on overhead rails, tending to spheres of crackling blue energy surrounded by copper and steel
rings. Through the energy fields, Weiss could see dark shapes moving.

“It's time to came to see the truth that many of the great thinkers of Atlas have, Weiss: the peace of
the Vytal treaty cannot last. The only reason it's lasted this long was the continuing threat of the
Grimm. Given the proliferation of Hunters and related technologies, it's been estimated that we
could render the Grimm threat manageable within four more decades. The boy Arc, however, has
moved this turn table up to sometime this decade.”

Weiss furrowed her brow, trying to put the pieces together before she was told. “And that's a bad
thing.”

“Most wouldn't realize it, but yes. The moment the Grimm cease to be a threat, there will be no
reason for the kingdoms and the factions within them to cooperate. War will break out and even
the conquering nations will be torn apart by infighting from within. Only those who are prepared
for the fight ahead will survive.”

Wilhelm manipulated some controls on the gantry and it began to lower from the level of the
elevator.

As they came closer, Weiss tried to see through the nearest energy fields. She was only just able to
catch a glimpse of the sleek, pacing shape of what appeared to be a big cat.

“This place is how you intend to prepare then, Father? And you need my help?”

“Indeed. Tell me Weiss; do you know what humans did with Dust before modern weapons
appeared?”

Weiss nodded obediently. “They embroidered crystals into clothing. Before that, there are records
of people actually implanting the crystals in their own bodies.”

The gantry reached the ground and, to Weiss's surprise, her father opened the gate and gestured for
her to go first. She did, feeling the fine hairs on the back of her neck starting to stand up from all
the suspicious behavior.

“Correct,” said Wilhelm, leading Weiss toward the nearest assembly line. “Implanted Dust crystals
impert grand power upon the recipient, but are horribly inefficient, depleting almost one thousand times the rate of a crystal used to power a Dust circuit.”

He cast a baleful look in his youngest daughter's direction. “If there's anything the insolent pup Arc is correct about is that naturally-occurring Dust is a finite resource. Crystals of a usable size are more rare still. However, several years ago, a researcher for the SDC asked a question long overdue: what happens if you implant a depleted crystal into a Grimm?”

With that, they were finally close enough for Weiss to see through the energy field. She had to bite back a shriek.

The creature within was the size of a luxury car with a powerful, low slung feline body covered in shadowy flesh and fur interrupted by plates and spikes of bone. And its face was a bone mask decorated with thin, looping lines of blood red that matched the horrible crimson eyes peering from slits where a normal panther's eyes would be.

Upon seeing her, the Grimm hurled itself against the energy barrier, claws scrabbling against it but failing to gain purchase.

Wilhelm went to stand just inches from the barrier, daring to stare the berserk Grimm in the face. “This, my dear daughter, is a rare type of Grimm native only to the jungles of Vacuo. They call it a Bagheera and it exhibits the best balance of strength, agility, resilience, sensory capacity and cunning.” As if further enraged by his utter fearlessness in the face of it, the Bagheera began slashing wildly at Wilhelm to no effect.

“Just five years ago we thought containing Grimm for longer than a few days was impossible.” Wilhelm said, more to himself than anyone. Then he turned back to Weiss. “We chose the Bagheera because the recipient expresses traits of the donor Grimm. The trials using Goliaths, Creeps and Boarbatusks were especially gruesome.”

As they watched, a set of assembly line robots arrived. One dropped a thick ring attached to a tangle of hoses atop the energy field, dissipating it within the ring's circumference. Then a second arm, this one holding what appeared to be a depleted and inert elemental Earth Dust crystal int its actuators, trust down into the enclosure with the force of one of Yang's punches.

The crystal punched through a seam between two bone plates and the results were immediate. The Bagheera shrieked, bowing its back before throwing itself to the floor of the cell trying to rub the crystal off.

It wasn't helping, as the shadowy mass that was its body began to spiral and plunge impossibly into the facets of the crystal. The once-green gem began to turn black as if it were burning away from within.

Weiss couldn't keep from shivering as the pieces fell into place. They were somehow charging Dust crystals with Grimm essence... and then putting them into people. How many had they done this to? What had happened to the 'gruesome' results? Did her own father really mean to commit such an abomination on her?

Wilhelm just stared at the tortured, dying Grimm as parts of its body were no longer substantive enough to hold on to the bone plates and spikes, allowing them to drop to the floor of the cell. “The other complication was the fact that all the previous test subjects hadn't had their aura unlocked. The process rapidly deteriorated their bodies and they... degenerated.”

There was nothing on Remnant that would make Weiss want to know what he meant by that.
“All accept one: the one that gave us the key. A wolf faunus brought up from the main mine. The pain and stress of the process unlocked her Aura.” A cold glint lit his eyes. “She was magnificent. Stronger, faster, better in all ways and stable. We got seventy-two hours worth of data out of her before we had to terminate her.”

She didn't want to know the answer to this either, but Weiss asked anyway. “W-why?”

For the first time in years, Weiss heard her father's laugh—an actual genuine laugh. It still sounded cold. “Did you miss the part where I said she was a faunus? We can't trust one of their kind with this power. I wouldn't trust most humans with it.”

He turned to fully face her. “That is why I want to give it to you.”

Chapter End Notes

Some might get the impression that Mr. Schnee might be a bad guy from all this. You know, a correct impression.

And yes, this make Weiss technically Black Cat and Black Panther. Probably won't use those names though. For Weiss's stuff, I'm drawing a lot from the 90's Spider-man animated series, specifically John Hardeski's involvement in stealing Project Rebirth which resulted in Felicia becoming Black Cat, and later, Dr. Herbert Landon's mutate research (and not just because his last name is my first name).

I used the Dust crystal implantation thing because I'm well aware that this fusion's been more Marvel than RWBY recently, so I'm focusing on a RWBY power source here. The implantation stuff is canon, though they never explain why people stopped doing it (my theory is that this is the origin of Semblances).

Can't take credit for the Bagheera though. It's been one of he more prominent FNDM Grimm types for a while now, next to Nemians (lions). I do have an original one coming up. Hint: it might be the reason we don't see many goats in RWBY.

I was very careful here to make Papa Schnee as distant as possible here. His children aren't emotional beings to him, they're god soldiers in his war to get what he wants. So you'll notice he doesn't even use pet names for his kid. Not dear or honey or sweetie, just Weiss. That's all she is to him.

Here we also see more of Jaune's unintended consequences. He's making people think Vale is making weapons and spooking paranoid war-hawks who think Grimm are necessary to keeping the peace. How far would those people go? We'll see.

One more issue before we get back to Jaune, Pyrrha and the team. Next however, we'll travel with Cinder to the heart of Grimm territory as she reports to Salem and we learn her original plans for Jaune and how they've changed.
As much as I hate author's notes before a chapter, I feel it's necessary here because I need to make something clear before one reads the opening here. You see, the reason it's taken me so long to update Arc Reaction is in part because Volume 4 dropped and its opening is almost exactly like the opening to this chapter. I want to make clear that Arc Reaction isn't really bound by Volume 4 in any way. I may use a few characters (but never Tyrion—I hate the giggling madman/Joker ripoff archetype) and ideas, but Arc Reaction and its sequel were conceptualized before it came out and I don't plan to change anything major. So please don't take the opening as anything more than a coincidence and the fact that I totally called the Grimm spawn from pools, and please don't ask when elements of Vol 4 will be added because they probably won't.

Except Whitley. He's just the right kind of terrible little snot I've been hoping for in the Schnee clan.

Now, without further ado:

It was storming, but Cinder knew that the sea below them as Mercury piloted their Bullhead toward their destination was always turbulent.

And not made of water.

Long ago, before mankind abandoned the western continent, the place have been called the Shallow Sea and had been shunned even then. The liquid was toxic to humans and even if it wasn't, going near the place was tantamount to suicide.

Cinder looked down as they approached the coastline whee tide pools of black viscous liquid surged and heaved violently. As she watched, those surges became more violent until a series of white bone-like spines and plates broke the surface. First a single Beowolf emerged, then an entire pack. The creatures instinctively looked up, not at the approaching Bullhead, but rather toward the three sources of negative emotion within it. They snarled and began loping along the coast trying to keep up with the craft. Some of them that came too close to the sea were immediately seized by grasping claws or colossal tentacles and dragged shrieking back into the ichorous mire.

A gasp from the adjoining seat reminded her that she wasn't alone looking out at the blasted hellscape surrounding the Shallow Sea. She sneered.

"Don't be afraid, Emerald." Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the dark-skinned woman start to relax. "Fear attracts them. Makes them more savage. Remember?"

Emerald shivered. Mission accomplished.

"Besides," Cinder continued lackadaisically, "No Grimm would ever approach Salem's sanctum without being summoned there." With a sweeping hand motion, she directed her lackey's gaze toward the cockpit and through the windscreen toward a towering man made earthwork rising...
nearly two hundred feet from the rocky beach and jutting out over the water.

A structure crouched at the top of it like a sated jungle cat dozing after a kill. The main building was hexagonal in shape with flying buttresses holding aloft a stately if now moss-riddled marble dome. Lesser stone outbuildings trailed back down the earthwork, connected to the main body by roofed walkways that once had glass walls to look out over the grounds, now shattered. A smaller dome—this one of unbroken glass or perhaps Freeze Dust—extended out of the front of the main building, hanging out into space. And on the read of the main building, elevated from the ground, was a landing pad, enigmatically marked with a long-faded capital letter 'H'.

Mercury landed the Bullhead dead center and flipped off the ignition. “Monster Island,” he declared, pulling off his headset. “End of the line.”

“It really could be if Salem hears you talking about her place like that,” Emerald snapped, putting all her nervous energy into her favorite stress relief pastime: sniping at Mercury.

“Behave children.” Cinder sauntered to the rear of the craft where the ramp controls were located and let down the cargo ramp. Warm rain blew in from the storm raging overhead, something she refused to flinch at or even react to at all. “Let's go hear what our Mistress has to say. No doubt she's pleased at the last report I delivered concerning the imminent culmination of our plans.”

“Explain to me how this will not end in failure or another multi-year 'modification' like all the other times you've informed me that the endgame is nigh.”

Salem stood tall and proud atop a dais at the end of a great hall within her sanctum. Whatever it had been used for in times past, Salem had turned it into a combination laboratory and museum long before any of her three young visitors had been born.

Brass and steel vats with viewing windows built into their sides revealed terrifying creatures or at least what had once been creatures. Some of them were visibly recognizable as Grimm: a the left side of a Beowolf Alpha, cleanly bisected and showing off the swirling shadows and frothing black liquid that made up its insides, a juvenile Deathstalker with its claw flensed of its carapace to reveal a gelatinous mass covered with thousands of tiny white 'hairs' that might have been minuscule bone plates, and a Boarbatusk with all its bone plates ripped off and floating in the transparent gel around it.

Others were something more terrible. Here a large mastiff was caught in mad-stride, its hindquarters matted with the black liquid of the Shallow Sea, tiny tendrils emerging from the surface, its back leg swollen and grotesque; what may have been a warren's worth of rats doused in the same substance, locked eternally in attacking one another; a horse with its face consumed, its jaw distended and showing knifelike teeth.

Worse of all we re the humans—or what had been humans. Their bodies were so twisted by the black ichor that even Cinder refused to look. She especially avoided the ones nearest Salem's 'workspace', the ones who had developed bone plates and red eyes the ones that looked terrifyingly normal, just cloaked in black with an extra set of red eyes on their foreheads. It wasn't because of their appearance, but because she knew those at least were still alive.

The Mistress of Grimm herself was tall, slightly built, but imposing for the bone-white skin and black-red pulsing veins that crisscrossed her body. Her clothing—really part of her unique flesh—clung and flowed in all the right places, making everything about her appearance seem effortless.
Proving her mettle, Cinder met Salem's eyes evenly even though she kept her tone measured and respectful. “This time is different. There are no more 'ifs', no more timing. The pieces have fallen into place. To be quite honest, I could be executing the final steps as we speak if I hadn't been summoned here.”

Salem rolled her eyes, turning away to tend to the strange plants that occupied the dais around her. They were twice as tall as she was with white stems, black leaves and blood red flowers that shaded to black at the center. Beneath their leaves, dark pulsating pods squirmed and writhed. It was these that Salem poked and prodded with detached curiosity.

“How many times have I heard this. I recall a decade ago when you had a venture in the works with the criminal mastermind of Vale until you found your new 'project' in the Arc child. At the time you only had his legendary name and a few schematics and you promised that if I was patient for a few short years, our victory would be ten times more complete than the idea of attacking the Vytal Festival.

“Then he built something new—something that annihilates my Grimm with the efficiency of a hundred Hunters I will add and you told me that you could build him up into such a great hope that his engineered downfall would generate enough despair to raise a dozen of my lost Wyverns.”

Glancing over her shoulder, Salem narrowed her eyes at her subordinate. “Then just one year ago you stood in this spot and said that there was a deal in place with Atlas that would mean we could topple both Atlas and Vale in a mere twenty-four hours. And finally, you came to me mere months ago begging for ancient knowledge of the Star Dragon to accelerate your machinations. So forgive me for not expecting yet another delay.”

At this, she turned away from the plants to face Cinder again. “Know this Cinder Fall: You are not my only agent in the world and though I am now eternal, my patience is not. Especially when you try to conceal very real complications from me.”

Cinder blinked. “What complications? Arc's new toy? His new allies? They're hardly a threat because I've already planned for them.”

“I have seen your 'plans' as well. And their failures.”

“Not failures at all,” Cinder waved the notion away. “Ozpin's eye has fallen onto Arc. He expects stories and prophecy coming true; for us to try for the Maidens again.”

“And you don't consider that a complication.” Salem said dully, clearly not believing her.

Cinder laughed lightly. “Not at all, because I'm giving him prophecy and fairy tales to chase. Something to send Arc, his friends and Ozpin's entire organization to focus on in this hand,” She held one fist out to her left, “While this hand,” She held out her other hand out to the right, “Is delivering the coupe de grace to Humanity.”

Salem's lips formed a tight, thin line. “And how can you be so sure this will work.”

A slick smile split Cinder's face. “Because when I visited the Star Dragon's chamber, I left a wake-up call for him. And for another? In two days, the Board of directors is scheduled to deliver a vote of no confidence against Jaune Arc, and install me as CEO—putting all of the weapons, all of the resources and most importantly all of the access Arc Industries has under my and therefore your control.”

She sketched a low bow, long hair brushing the floor. “Oh yes, Mistress: this is happening.”
There was no rain on the cliffs a few miles east of Beacon Academy (conveniently screened from the view of SHIELD's invisible tower by the mountains), but the wind what whipping Pyrrha's hair into a flowing red wave out to her side. It was bad enough that Jaune had placed himself on her other side to avoid being constantly flogged by it. He loved his girlfriend's long hair, but preferred it under standard lab conditions.

For the first time since the press conference, he was dressed for business—at least to the value of it that he usually achieved. His sport coat was buttoned against the wind, he lacked a tie, and he had on the same brand of shades he'd worn at the Vacuo test.

“He's officially half an hour late.” Pyrrha announced, checking her scroll. “Considering his past, I'm starting to believe he took your money and ran. The purchase was off the record after all.”

Jaune shook his head. “Nah. Torchwick might be a bunch of things: a liar, a thief, probably a murderer was some point, a really snappy dresser—wait. I just got off track. Anyway, he's not exactly a good person, but he's the kind of criminal that keeps his word whether it's the give you what you paid for or break your legs for not paying. He'll be here.”

At this point, he paused, squinting up at the sky before looking around. The wind was blowing incredibly hard, but not across the entire grassy meadow atop the cliff. He rolled his eyes. “Actually, you know what Roman Torchwick almost certainly is? The kind of asshole that would show up early and concealed just so he could spy on us to see what the plane's for.”

There was no reply to that, only a raised eyebrow from Pyrrha. Jaune groaned, pinched his brow, and looked skyward again. “I know we're standing in your jet wash, you know?”

Still nothing.

He sighed. “And also I will give you one thousand lien if you stop playing along with this, Neo.”

Nothing.

“Alright. Ten thousand.”

No sooner were the words out of his mouth that the sky seemed to shatter. The cloudy sky exploded as if someone had smashed a plate glass window, shards falling a few yards before shimmering out of existence. Suddenly the sun was blotted out by two shapes: one a sleek Atlas-style light cruiser with an elongated forward bridge and a bulkier rear housing its Dust reactor, the other Torchwick's signature aircraft: a very subtle gold-painted luxury model Bullhead with Torchwick's personal crest stamped on the side.

Immediately after, Jaune's Scroll vibrated. He checked even though the text message it had received was exactly what he expected: 'Pay Up ~ Neo.'

Both ships descended shortly after appearing, setting down lightly on the grass. While the Bullhead lowered its ramp, the side doors of the cruiser opened to allow Neo, parasol in hand, to saunter out. Her free hand was extended, demanding payment in person.

“I'll send the money to your account.” Jaune huffed.

“You know, I'm not sure who to be more upset with: you for being a party pooper or or her for being a traitor.” Torchwick came down the ramp of the Bullhead, his cane resting on his shoulder. But tell you what: All will be forgiven if you tell me exactly what you want with my top of the
Pyrrha straightened her back. She'd never had the odd camaraderie Jaune shared with the man and had always been uneasy with knowing that his 'alleged' criminal past had not only gone unpunished but rewarded with fortune and legitimization. “That would be none of your business Mr. Torchwick. Now that the product has been delivered, our business has been concluded.”

Torchwick snickered. “Oh don't be like that. We're all fr—” he cut himself off because Pyrrha was shaking her head, “Acquaintances?” She shook her head again. “We tolerate each other without violence at least, and to me that means something.” He shifted his attention to Jaune. “Come on Jaune my boy, you understand how it might make one curious when you ask for the fastest, most agile and longest ranged model my company offers delivered to an undisclosed location.”

Before Jaune could say anything, Torchwick planted his cane's tip on the ground, leaning heavily on it. “Or at least I was curious. That is until a little bird—well a little... I think she's a squirrel or something...or a deer. Whatever—an informant of mine told me all about a big brouhaha in the Emerald Forest the other night. Said Taurus was mighty pissed at a man in powered armor and his team that included a psycho redhead that wielded a hammer and threw lightning. Story sort of reminded me of the shindig last week when ol' Juggs attacked and the—ahem--other psycho redhead you know started throwing lightning.”

That earned him a glare from Pyrrha. “What? I meant the girl with the scythe.”

Jaune stepped between Torchwick and Pyrrha before the latter decided to deal with the former at javelin-point. “Whatever you're implying, Torchwick—and I'm not admitting to anything—let's cut to the chase: how much do you want to keep quiet.”

Torchwick's face split into a grin. “My goodness, the boy can be taught! We'll make a 'totally legitimate businessman' out of you yet.”

“Get on with it!” Jaune shouted, exasperated.

“Heh. Very well. Without admitting to anything myself; from time to time from this point on, you may on occasion receive a Scroll message alleging one party or another of a crime. These allegations will always be one hundred percent legitimate and—”

“No deal,” Jaune cut him off. “I'm not going to turn the other way.”

Torchwick laughed again. “Who said I wanted that? Of course I want you to do everything in your power to deal with those nefarious lawbreakers. In fact, I insist—get me?”

Jaune blinked, not getting it for a moment before. “Oh. Yeah, I get it. Not all bad guys are on the same team. Fine. You have a deal—but you can't tell me who not to go after, got it?”

Stepping forward, Torchwick extended his hand, which Jaune shook. “Excellent. And if there's anything else you or our friends might need, I'll even give you the friends and family discount.” He winked at Pyrrha. “Sorry; friends and family and people onto whom we don't wish any specific harm. Which now that I think if it, are all completely different things: if your family's anything like mine, that last part's furthest from the truth.”

Screaming. Agonized, animalistic screaming filled the hive of concrete tunnels. It had gone on for hours, echoing endlessly.
The room from which they emerged was a fortified cylinder ten feet across. At its center was a hexagonal cage made of Freeze Dust that could be raised or lowered by hydraulic lifts. The only other furniture in the room were a wooden chair and a small side table.

In the chair sat Wilhelm Schnee, leaning forward, back hunched, eyes intent. The focus of that close attention was inside the cage: a woman who, if standing would have been well over six feet tall with hair as black as a Nevermore's innards, skin sun-kissed a soft caramel brown but marred by unnatural black spidery veins stretched out across it and her eyes which glowed with the hideous red of a Grimm's. Her body was powerfully built but lithe as a jungle cat's.

She screamed, she thrashed, she raged, slamming her fists into the six walls surrounding her with a strength that made the whole room vibrate. One blow in particular made the Dust panes rattle and Wilhelm to shift in his seat.

“Focus!” He ordered in a loud, firm voice. “A Grimm Essence is like any Semblance: you can master it just as you mastered your Semblance. Focus. Take control.”

His words seemed to calm the furious woman slightly. She backed away from the wall facing him and clutched at her head. “I...” speaking revealed elongated canines and sharp teeth. “It hurts,” she moaned at length. “Oh Dust, it hurts.”

Wilhelm remained unmoved. “Pain is the mother of change. And change is precisely what you must do. Focus on that. Use that pain.”

Breathing ragged, the woman put out one hand to lean against the wall. Her other hand was pressed against her temple. “You don't... I... my body is burning. A-and I can feel... I feel things. Pain. Hate. Anger. Oh Dust, it ta—it feels good. Please make it... make it...” she cut off in another shriek of rage, slamming a fist into the wall.

In an instant, Wilhelm Schnee was on his feet, rushing the wall and punching it himself in an uncharacteristic show of emotion. “You will not fail me. Failing me is defying me! Tell me: do these emotions: this hate, this disdain, this disgust at your pitiful weakness taste good?” He smacked the wall with an open palm, meeting the gaze of the strange woman with one of his own. “You think you're strong enough to sunder this cage and perhaps you are, but are you really strong enough now to question me when you've never been before?!”

Something in the question seemed to strike the woman like a physical blow. She recoiled from him in horror, her body wracked by convulsions until she collapsed, screaming once more. Her form contorted, shrinking in both stature and bulk. Brown skin faded to pink, then paled even further. Black hair fell out, rapidly replaced by white.

Weiss Schnee dropped to her hands and knees on the cold floor inside the cell. Her eyes were wide open, unblinking. But she was alive and appeared to have control over her new Grimm essence.

Staring down at the young woman before him, Wilhelm Schnee saw not a daughter or a victim of his quest for power, but a key; a key to everything he'd ever wanted since coming to understand what was really going on in the world of Remnant.

A rare and genuine smile came to his face. “That's my girl.” he said quietly, then left the cell.

Chapter End Notes
And there you have it. Sorry you had to wait so long for a set-up chapter, but we did have a few reveals including Weiss's new super mode.

Were down to two Arcs in Arc Reaction before the end game, so hold on to your butts. Starting next chapter, we'll be going into alternating arcs: one involving Jaune, Pyrrha and the Patch Sisters at the Arc family estate and the rest of the team back at the compound getting to know each other and defending against a new foe and an old friend coming courting.

Also taking all comers who want to guess what the stuff and the sanctum means. It's probably not what you think.

Finally, I'm thinking of offering some paid commissions via P/atreon. I'm not entirely sure of this, but I'm in pretty desperate need of money right now and writing is what I do so... Maybe at the very least I can offer to prioritize chapters of my fics ahead of my other writing for some cash (as in, guarantee I'll put out a chapter of one of them that same week). PM me if you want to speak your peace on that matter.

Anyway, next chapter, Jaune and Pyrrha head down to the Arc farm and we get to meet more of the fam.
“There you are, you stealthy little booger.” Ruby's voice came from under the pilot's dash. She emerged holding a tiny device made of Wind Dust and wire with a pair of forceps. With minimal effort, she shattered it with the tool. “Exactly where Penny said it would be.”

Jaune was sitting in the co-pilot's chair, that dash having been pried open to reveal a nest of Dust crystals and circuits. He was busy adding silicon cards printed with silver circuits, making new interfaces for Arc Industries Dustless technology as well as personal innovations like the on-board Wardrobe system. “Is it wrong that I'm kind of disappointed in Roman for only planting five bugs on the ship he sold me?”

“You two have a weird relationship.” Ruby noted, going back under to button up the console she'd been rooting around in.

All Jaune could do was shrug. “Not going to argue about that. The guy was nice enough to me when we first met at the Vale Technologies Expo back in the day—until he sharked me on some materials deals and left me on the hook for a lopsided deal on capacitors. And even then he was all 'oh, it's just business buddy'. I wanna hate the guy but...”

“High charisma is a dangerous thing,” Ruby finished for him. “Heck, I got the guy arrested the first day I ever laid eyes on him and even I can't hate him.” She popped out from under the console and plopped down into the pilot's seat. “My side's done! Beat you!”

Jaune rolled his eyes. “Yeah, but you had help. Speaking of which...” He pulled out his scroll and checked the TeamSight app Ruby had provided them from Beacon. It allowed teammates to monitor the relative position and Aura levels of one another in battle.

When Jaune had mostly been using it for as checking to make sure the team's two resident SHIELD agents were nowhere around when he did things Ozpin might object to—like making large purchases from Roman Torchwick. Nora was easy to track—just follow the path of destruction and sweet snacks. But Ren... TeamSight was just the bell he needed for that incredibly stealthy cat. He liked the two of them, but they worked for Ozpin and Jaune's one encounter with him left a gulf of trust that needed to be filled. With spying.

After making sure Ren was in the Arc Compound's kitchen, he completed his thought. “Has Penny managed to get into SHIELD's files yet?”

“N-not very deeply, unless you want to know how much a toilet on a flying castle costs, or how much coffee Professor Ozpin imports from Vacuo a year. She says she'll keep digging, but she has to go slow to keep from alerting them to her presence.” She frowned and lowered her head. “I wish you would just trust people, Jaune. First Weiss, now SHIELD? You didn't used to be like this.”

He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Ruby, if there's anything I've learned in the past couple of months, it's that sometimes I put my trust in the wrong people. Someone in my company's been selling to the White Fang, it sounds like Cinder's the one who kept my family from contacting me...”

“Have you done anything about that yet? Because both me and Yang want a crack at her for that,”
Ruby interrupted.

“I called a few times. She's out of the office and her scroll seems to be out of the service range.” He bent over his wiring work and sighed, “Every time I miss her, I get more angry. By the time we're both in Vale at the same time again, there's gonna be a huge reckoning, I can feel it.”

Ruby blew a raspberry. “Not gonna say I'm rooting for it, but... I totally am. It's way past time you fired that creepy lady. Maybe you could give Velvet her job! That'd be awesome and it would be a pretty big statement about where you stand on faunus rights to have her as your CFO.”

That gave Jaune pause. He didn't even know if he could get rid of Cinder like that. “I... come on, Rubes, Cinder made me who I am. Even if I could, I don't think it'd be right to turn around and stab her in the back like that. Even if...” he let out a groan as he slotted a card into place. The in-no-way-related-despite-the-name Arc Dust crystals around it flashed once as they passed current into the new component. “Look, she's done something completely unforgivable here, but the thing about Cinder is that she's cold and greedy as hell. She's always talking about how much money she makes off her. She probably didn't give a second thought about getting rid of what she saw as a distraction.”

Ruby just started at him with dull eyes. “That is... in no way a good excuse.”

“I know.” he muttered, “But what I'm saying is, I think she might not... get this whole family, friendship and love thing. You ever see her office? No pictures. The only people I've ever seen her with are her assistant and bodyguard and she clearly doesn't like them. Maybe she just needs someone to reach out to her.”

“Um... you have reached out to her,” Ruby pointed out.

“Yeah, with the wrong appendage. You know how I am with women.”

That made his oldest friend smirk, remembering her first meeting with the blonde inventor. 'hey there Little Red Riding Hood. You sure are lookin' good. Better watch out for any Big, Bad Wolves on the prowl tonight.' “How did that go, anyway?”

“She asked if I was manscaped and then summoned a four inch obsidian razor before clarifying that she meant 'internally'. Then she said that unless we kept things strictly business, she would do it for me personally. And that was before I even opened my mouth. Never tried anything with her after that.”

Ruby stretched in the pilot's chair, giving a chuckle. “And after all that, you still think you can convert her to the side of good with the Power of Friendship.”

Jaune shrugged. “We live in a world full of murderous super-beasts that seem suspiciously tailor-made to annihilate all humanity with no means of learning anything about them. Hope is all we got, Rubes. Despite everything I said about trust before... people are all we've got.”

“But you still can't trust Weiss or Professor Ozpin?”

“Trust but verify. On to other things: thanks for volunteering to fly us out to Golden Fields.”

The little redhead grinned, “No problem, Jaune! I'm happy to help. Thank you for letting me and Yang come along.”

Jaune ducked his head before going back to work on inserting the last card. “Hey, if I'm going to be mending fences with my family, I might as well introduce them to the family I found while I was
away. You and Matte will get along really well I think—she's the new primary smith at the forge. You guys could probably talk weapons for days.”

“Aw, you're our family too, Jaune. I bet even Uncle Qrow would agree.” Even though she was smiling, Ruby's eyebrows knitted with concern. “So... are you nervous?”

“Beyond,” he admitted. “Just don't tell Pyrrha—she's already on pins and needles as it is.”

“Is that why you're putting all your nervous energy into turning this baby into a mobile command center even though we're just visiting Golden Fields for the weekend?”

“Partly. But mostly because so far we've gone to a ball and been attacked by the Juggernaut, then when we went to fight Auraless terrorists, we wound up against the White Fang's entire Valean chapter of Dust users. So really, this is just good preparation. Who knows: we might get attacked by a time traveling conqueror or aliens empires from outer space.”

That made Ruby snort and almost fall out of her chair laughing. “Yeah, or a guy with like a bunch of robot tentacles, or evil clones!”

The friends laughed for a while longer while Jaune finished wiring the dashboard. By the time they were done, it was time for dinner with the rest of the team.

RWBYRWBYRWBY

After a dinner of an excellent beef stew prepared by Ren, both Jaune and Pyrrha volunteered to wash the dishes while the rest of the team went off to their own devices. Ruby and Yang claimed the living room for video games while Ren and Blake disappeared to parts unknown. After a bit of wandering, Nora settled in to watch the Patch sisters' game in awe at the novel piece of entertainment.

“So what have you been up to?” Jaune asked, getting the water running, “I haven't seen you all day.”

The former champion gave him an enigmatic smile. “You were making your preparations, I was making mine.”

Jaune raised an wry eyebrow and accepted a pair of rubber gloves she offered him. “Did it by chance involve stressing over the trip tomorrow? Because you won't be alone if it's that.”

“Hmm. You're not wrong.” She grabbed a sponge and started rinsing bowls. “To be honest, I was doing some work to keep myself from blowing things out of proportion.”

He laughed. “Yeah, same here. But... what's with all the secrecy? What've you been working on?”

Another coy smile. “Oh, just keeping my promise from when you were sick after the battle with Adam.”

“I don't remember any promise...”

“That might be because it was a promise I made to myself: that if you weren't going to make an armor that could really protect you, I would. So since that day, I've been using the AutoCAD every moment I could spare. I spent today making some calls and then in the fabrication farm.” When her admission was met with total silence, she started to get pensive. “Um... that is okay, isn't it?”

Thankfully, when she glanced aside at him, she found a fond smile and a look of admiration.
When Jaune saw her seeing him, he turned his attention back to the dishes; he was drying as she washed. “It's more than okay.” He fumbled with a spoon as he tried to put the right words together. The words came slowly. “I get why you'd think it wouldn't though. Especially after our talk about why it's important to attune our Auras to our armor and weapons and I just insisted on new and bigger builds.”

After a long pause, he continued. “The whole thing with the Sentry was a wake-up call for me though. The systems I designed for you, Ruby and Yang worked perfectly. They worked for you guys because I know all three of you and even if the Scarlet Spider and Wasp Mks I were both just tweaks of the Hematite, they were adjusted to maximize efficiency for your fighting styles.”

“I mean... well you know this better than anyone: that's how I work. I can look at things—even how people move and fight and take it apart in my mind. Analyze it. After a while, see how to make it better. When it comes to the armors, I see what makes someone awesome and construct systems that enhance that and makes up for any shortcomings. Except... now I realize I can't do that for myself. I can't... see what there is to enhance about myself, so I just tried too hard to design something to make up for... well everything. All the shortcoming I have, all the ones I only think I have. Everything. And I know you can't get a good design out of that. Too many subsystems, too many conflicting design goals.”

His expression had contorted into something hard and serious as he laid out the situation. All of that melted away into a soft, adoring smile as he once more made eye contact with Pyrrha. “So I need an outside perspective. Someone who knows me—both my strengths and weaknesses and understands how I think.”

Reaching out, his gloved hands reached out to hers, relieving them of the bowl she was washing before taking hold of them. “There's no one more qualified for this and frankly, no one I'd be more thrilled to have building my armor. So it's... it's beyond alright what you did, Pyr. In fact, thank you.” He leaned in an gave her a quick kiss.

Even given how long he'd taken to lay out his feelings, Pyrrha still took a moment to fully absorb what he'd said. Over the years, she'd developed something of a callus when it came to praise. From fawning fans to her sponsors to her mother back in her tournament days, she'd had her fill of it. This time it was different though; not just because of who it came from, but for what. She's replicated and tweaked Jaune's designs before, but this was her first original piece of engineering. It was time to see if all the learning-by-osmosis she'd been doing had paid off and it made her a little giddy.

As they pulled back from the kiss, she smiled broadly with a playful little quirk on her lips. “Do... you want to see it?” She asked.

A spark of childlike glee entered Jaune's eyes. “Can I? Is it ready?”

Pyrrha nodded. “It still needs a shakedown flight, but there's no harm in trying it on. That is unless you were planning on going out to fight some more terrorists, Grimm or mystically empowered ex-classmates of mine. In which case, I'll have to insist you take the Scarab or one of the auxiliary Hematites. After all, I still have some calls out about some of the modules.”

At this Jaune blinked. “Modules?”

A few minutes later and the pair were across from the main house in the warehouse-like fabrication farm. The building was a natural expansion of the dozen or so rapid fabrication machines Jaune originally installed in his lab way back when Arc Industries first took off. What originally started
as a means of creating tools and parts he needed on the fly had grown into a fully automated factory and storage facility almost as large as the main house that took up more than a third of the space along the compound's western wall, right below that section's Helios unit.

By the time the couple reached the rack where the new armor had just emerged from being painted and detailed a few hours prior, they'd picked up an audience in the form of Ruby, Nora, Yang, and Ren plus Blake, who had been dragged along by Yang, but didn't seem all that attentive.

Made five times as awkward by having what she'd planned in her head as a private presentation to Jaune becoming a public speaking engagement, Pyrrha tried to ignore the small crowd as she synched her scroll to the farm's systems.

“S-so...” she began, “I was inspired by Professor... Director Ozpin's mention of the story of the Knight and the Star Dragon. Specifically, the Knight's weapon, which allowed him to do almost anything. I wanted to pattern the armor after that: one system that can perform any function it needs for a given mission. Obviously weight and power requirements...” she realized she was getting to technical—to the point Yang was yawning—and cut herself off. “Um, yes. Anyway I decided to make the armor modular. One base armor that could incorporate many different weapon, propulsion and defensive components. A base which I designed so it could be carried and deployed from a form the size of a suitcase.”

The many, many times she'd seen Jaune perform his showmanship hadn't rubbed off on Pyrrha at all. In fact, years of living a relatively private life with the amazing attention sink of Jaune Arc as her shield had made her old presentation skills rusty to the point of crumbling.

But she tried anyway, raising her hand toward one of the completion workbenches that lined the area and applying her semblance to the device lying there. A white, black and orange rectangle roughly the size of a large suitcase rose from its resting place and shot toward her in exactly the same manner as her weapons would.

That is, it shot toward her with the speed and urgency as if she desperately needed it to defend herself in combat. Everyone else in the room tensed even though Pyrrha barely looked as she caught the ballistic luggage with both hands, stopping its forward progress with a clapping sound that rang throughout the room. She barely even budged at the impact, the only sign there had even been one being her ponytail swaying back and forth.

The sound shocked her more than anything, and she cringed at it, completely ruining the effect as a whole. Letting out a sheepish laugh, she held up the metallic box, which now that it wasn't moving at sixty-miles and hour was clearly constructed of dozens of interlocking plates designed to slide over one another.

“Um... without further ado, I give you the Star Brand modular armor system. Jaune?”

The man in question had been standing beside her right up until he'd been ducking behind her to protect himself from the flying armor. Trying his level best to pretend that hadn't just happened, He stepped forward as Pyrrha popped the locked on the 'suitcase' and used her semblance to lower it to the ground before him.

Inside the 'luggage' was a chaos of moving parts clustered around a pair of foot prints exactly his size. It didn't take a genius to realize what he was supposed to do, so he stepped onto those footprints.

Immediately the machine came alive. Metal plates extended and locked around his feet as struts extended out to the sides before snapping into place around his knees, dragging the metal cables of
the artificial muscle systems. Using those as tracks to follow, a new set of struts followed, connecting from his knees to his thighs and then a segmented brace rose to encompass his waist. Within moments, his body and limbs were encased in the familiar artificial muscle system. Then more components, following magnetic tracks (he couldn't help by chuckle that it had taken Pyrrha to think up that innovation) started rising out of the shell of the 'suitcase': repulsers, connector nodes, ECM systems, sensors, and finally the Arc Reactor itself, which slotted into position on his chest.

Last of all, the armor plates and flight surfaces assembled, white with black mesh at the joints and muted orange connection nodes along most flat planes along his limbs and on his back. A gold eight-pointed star symbol covered the Arc Reactor. The helmet followed the rest, an stylized visor like that which belonged to a knight of old.

Jaune looked down at his hands while at the same time checking all the start-up diagnostics flashing across his HUD. Most interesting were a series of icons flashing along the bottom labeled 'Swordsman', 'Falcon', and a final one marked 'PendingProjectTitan'.

“Nice.” He commented, hearing his voice coming out extra deep and augmented by the armor. “What are Swordsman, Falcon and Project Titan though?”

Forgetting her less than stellar performance in presentation, Pyrrha beamed. “Well those are the three modules I've designed—though project Titan isn't done yet. They're also a prototype for that remote armor delivery idea we discussed. Would you like to give it a try?”

“Sure.” Inside the armor, Jaune grinned widely. What he'd said before hadn't been just empty platitudes: it really did mean a lot to him for her to have designed this for him. He selected the Swordsman module.

'Swordsman Close-range Offensive System active and en route. Please stand by.'

There was an icon to bring up a map of the module's progress, but there was no need, as a moment later, a repulser blast launched a five-foot long, six-inch wide metal capsule from another completion workbench. It was painted white and gold, and flew unerringly for the Starbrand's right arm. Once it was in range, it snapped open to reveal a series of orange connection ports which locked onto his arm with a set of powerful electromagnets.

Then, like the scabbard of Crocea Mors, it expanded open into a shield, only instead of a simple kite shield, it became a lozenge-shaped tower shield. And in the middle, attached to the rear, was an over-sized mechanical hilt.

Taking it in his free hand, Jaune manipulated the trigger mechanism on it, extending a narrow T-shaped bar to about three feet long. The moment it was fully extended, the hilt whirred to life, filling the twin plasma channels along the sides of the bar with crackling yellow-gold plasma.

Their audience went silent for a long moment.

Ruby broke said silence. “Ohmigoodess, it's a plasma sword. They can make plasma swords now, Yang!” In a flash of rose petals, she was directly in Pyrrha's personal space. “Can you upgrade Crescent Rose to be a plasma scythe? Oh please, oh please, oh please?”

“You do realize you're going to be hearing about this all the way to Golden Fields, right?” Jaune asked as Ruby's begging continued unabated.

Pyrrha reached out and ruffled Ruby's hair. “We'll see what we can do, Ruby. After all, I'd hate to
hurt your baby in the process.” That got the younger woman to back off a bit luckily. With a smile, she turned to Jaune, “So how do you like it?”

Giving the glowing, humming sword an experimental flourish and checking the balance of his shield, Jaune gave a satisfactory nod. “I love it.”

“Then even if Ruby begs the whole time we're there, it's worth it.”

Chapter End Notes

So there have been a lot of Avengers members over the years and only a few of them have been in the movies so far. Which made it pretty funny that everyone and their mother was trying to fit the whole crew into terms of the MCU when I had all of comic history to play with and showed no qualms about mixing and matching.

I went around and around on who Jaune would 'be' in this fic in terms of which superhero identity he'd have and then I asked 'What would Tony Stark Do'. And the answer was he'd never stop making armors. He'd keep changing and improving and he'd never settle.

So how do I get out of that? The Starbrand, Marvel's answer to the Green Lantern Ring in many ways. It can do just about anything limited to the user's imagination. It just so happens that I also linked Jaune to the 'Star Knight' already.

Having Pyrrha be the one to design it came from my interpretation of Jaune's character in canon, which is exactly what he describes in story: he knows what makes everyone special but himself (which is ironically what makes him special). He needs outside forces to step in and show him what he's actually capable of just as much as (as I've described before) he needs 'pieces' to move around on the battlefield to show his tactician abilities.

Also, I really, really needed to establish Pyrrha's bonafides in making armor for later. Wink.

The conversation between Ruby and Jaune was a pleasure to write as it shows how Jaune's worldview has matured without falling into the trap of being jaded and cynical. He's NOT blindly trusting SHIELD, but he is trusting Penny because he trusts Ruby.

That dishwashing scene originally went on for-goddamn-ever. I couldn't find a way out of it for the life of me even as it turned into Pyrrha monologging about the armor's specs and me wanting to shoot myself to make it end. That's actually why I did the presentation bit; to end that conversation.

Next chapter, we arrive at Golden Fields while a rainstorm strikes the Arc compound and someone arrives bearing gifts—and secrets.
Golden Fields lay in a mountain valley north of Vale. It was unreachable by land route, leaving only air and river travel as options. It was remote enough that the CCT had no relays to it, leaving it out of communication with the rest of the world, but it was rich enough in resources that the rest of the world came to it bearing whatever the natives wanted in exchange for their wealth of crops, fish, lumber and metal ores—everything the modern world coveted save Dust.

Not many people chose to move to Golden Fields: it took weeks to get correspondence in or out, Dust prices were exorbitant, and without a CCT relay one couldn't even take in the simple entertainment of a tournament. It was a simple life; one not for everyone.

So it got the attention of the entire town when a private airship flew overhead, bypassing the air docks used by the workaday traders and soared instead toward the western edge of town where the Arc farm and forge lay.

The ship slowed over the main yard between the three story farmhouse and the low domed form of the forge. Gently as a falling leaf, it extended landing struts and set down. The whine of its Dust engines slowly died down even as the fore landing ramp lowered.

Said ramp hadn't even touched ground before the side door of the farmhouse opened. From it emerged a woman in her mid-fifties in a calf-length sky blue work dress over a cream-colored blouse. Her voluminous hair, once ash blonde now beginning to fade to gray, reached down to her waist where it was gathered by a sky blue ribbon tied in a bow. At the top, her hair was tamed by an Alice band with a pair of protuberances at the top that looked vaguely like horns.

Trailing behind her was a lanky teen whose awkward gait and straw-colored hair marked her out as Jaune's sister better than any name or blood. She was wearing khaki shorts, a black tank top, and a hunter green zip-up hoodie that flapped in the wind as she hurried to follow the older woman's longer, more confident strides.

Shortly thereafter, the door opened again and three more people exited the house. One was an older man; a once powerful frame only slightly diminished by age and disused as he leaned partially on the cane in his left hand and partially on the muscular young woman supporting him on the right. He had a mane of yellow hair streaked with gray and a neatly trimmed beard that matched. He was dressed far more formally than the others; a tailored white suit with the Arc family double-arc crest on the breast pocket over a golden vest.

The woman supporting him was as muscular as the man likely had been in his prime, her physique emphasized by the tight charcoal t-shirt and dark track pants she wore. Her hair, a shade or two darker than the ash blonde of the older woman's was held back in a tight ponytail.

Bringing up the rear was a woman of a height of the one supporting the man, but without even half the muscle mass. In fact, she was a wisp of a woman, dressed in a light gray blouse and jeans. Her hair, the same color as the other woman's, was cut in a short brush. She moved with far more hesitance than the others as if fretting over every step.

From the top of the ramp, Jaune started to descend with Pyrrha by his side. They had each other's hand in a death grip as they tried to soothe one another's nerves. Behind them came Blanche, Gris...
and Rey, who originally resisted the invitation from Gris, citing how Jaune's return should be a private family moment. Gris countered that if Jaune could consider the Patch sisters family and invited them, she could invite him. Besides, he'd already met her family and they adored him.

The aforementioned Yang and Ruby were last down the ramp, the former carrying the Starbrand armor in its suitcase form.

The instant Jaune came into sight, the lanky girl broke into a loping run, blowing past the older woman and cannoning into him before he even reached the bottom of the ramp, throwing her arms around him. “Jaune, Jaune, Jaune! You're back! You're really back! Blanche said you were coming, but I didn't really believe it but now you're here!”

After a moment to process, Jaune let go of Pyrrha's hand and put them around his youngest sister. “Yeah I'm here, Verte. And I promise I won't stay away anymore.”

“That's encouraging to hear.” By then the older woman had arrived, stopping within an arm's length of the embracing siblings.

Jaune swallowed hard as his eyes rose to meet hers. “M-mom,” he croaked out. Still holding Verte with one arm, he took a step forward and drew his mother into the embrace as well.

“Oh Jauney,” she said, enveloping her children in her arms. “I'm so happy to finally see you again. Dust how you've grown.” Drawing back from him, she cupped his chin with one hand and lifted it to get a better look at his face. “I can't believe it's been almost ten years.”

Tears were starting to form in his eyes from an ache that had been growing for the better part of a decade. He'd tried justifying his break from the family to himself, cloaking it in righteous indignation or bitter resentment. He'd tried to drown out how much he'd missed them in drink. He'd tried to dilute himself into thinking the family he'd made could truly replace the one he'd left behind. But none of it made those feelings go away completely.

Choking back a sob that threatened to bubble to the surface, Jaune shook his head. “I'm sorry,” was all he managed.

“No,” a new voice, deep and sonorous spoke up. “I'm the one who's sorry.” The older man and his miniature entourage had finally reached them. He planted the cane; a length of steel inlaid with white enamel and tipped with a golden lion's head frozen in mid-roar; and stood with it alone to support him as the two women with him moved to stand on either side.

Jaune finally looked away from his mother to his father and everyone fell silent.

Leon Arc stood unwavering before the mixed emotions in his only son's eyes and chose his words carefully. “I can't say I'm sorry for what I did. Eventually son, you'll have your own family to look after and you too will be willing and unashamed to do whatever it takes to see your children happy.

“No, what I'm sorry for is failing to live up to your expectations so badly that you felt you have to break from the family—and for building up those expectations in the first place. I failed you, your sisters and your mother, son. And I hope you can forgive me.”

Hesitantly, Jaune extricated himself from his mother and youngest sister and took a step toward Leon, lowering his gaze. “No, I'm the one that's sorry. I overreacted.” Reaching up, he scrubbed his hands though his hair. “I overreacted and I'm the one that hurt the family.”

Leon hesitated a moment before taking a step forward and putting two meaty paws on Jaune's shoulders. Those hands, which had ended hundreds of Grimm over the years, rested there as lightly
as feathers. “Now that's simply not true. Don't think we're so out of touch out here that we haven't heard what you've been doing out there in the greater word; the great things you've done in the family name.” A small smile graced the older man's face as he looked over his son's shoulder at the small entourage that had accompanied him. “And I get the feeling that you didn't have to do it alone either.”

Lost in the moment, Jaune took a second to figure out what he was talking about. “Oh. Um... sorry.” He pulled away enough that his present family members had a clear view of his friends. “These are my friend Ruby Rose,” Ruby waved happily and put on her biggest smile. “Her sister Yang Xiao Long,”

Yang threw a peace symbol. “Yo.”

“And last but certainly not least, Pyrrha Nikos my girlfriend and...” he paused, searching for the proper words to fully encompass what Pyrrha was to him. Only one came close and even then it fell short. He used it anyway: “My partner. In my work. In my life. Basically in everything.”

The woman in question took her place next to him again and threaded her arm through his. “It's a pleasure to meet you all.”

Jaune gave her arm a squeeze before giving the other half of the introductions. “Everyone here knows Blanche and Gris and apparently Rey, so there are my other sisters: Verte,” he reached out with his free hand and ruffled the youngest sister's hair, “We call her Vert because she hates it. And these are the twins: Matte and Claire.” First he gestured to the muscular woman, then the slim, mousy one. “Believe it or not, they're identical.”

“Just goes to show you what can happen when one twin actually works for a living.” the twin known as Matte said, flexing one bulging bicep.

“Accounting is real work,” Claire half-muttered. “We're both just as valuable to the business: without you we have no product, without me we have no capital.”

“We'd still have money if you weren't around telling us what's too expensive.” Matte did air quotes for the last part.

“Not if you spent it all on things that were too expensive.”

Jaune rolled his eyes. Even after a decade... “Moving on. These are my parents, Muriel and Leon Arc.”

Leon merely bowed his head in greeting while Muriel smiled broadly. “It's so nice to have Jaune back—and to have his friends visiting. You are staying, right?”

“For the whole weekend,” Blanche volunteered. “I'm sure Jaune wants to stay longer but...”

“...but there's some pressing business matters I have to get in order next week,” Jaune interrupted. “But don't worry: I'm never going out of contact that long again. Actually I brought something to help with that—a new communication system Arc Industries will be rolling out next year. It allows communication without line-of-site with the CCT—for example if there's giant Grimm-infested mountains between a town and the Vale CCT. Basically since most of my designs these days don't use Dust, they can work outside the planet's atmosphere. We've had twelve satellites up there for years, tracking Grimm movements, mapping the planet, and so forth, but it was only recently that someone realized that if they can transmit data they've gathers and receive instructions, they can also relay communicat—"
He broke off as a wave of self-awareness finally hit him. “And I'm talking way too much about boring technical stuff. What I mean to say is we brought satellite-relay scrolls for the whole family. We can talk directly at any time from now on. Uh... where are Marron and Violetta?”

“Oh. I never got the chance to tell you with everything that's happened,” said Blanche, “Marron got a job as an airship pilot on the route between here and Vacuo. Violetta is studying abroad in Atlas. Both of them wanted to be here, but it was such short notice...”

“But if we're going to be in contact from now on, you'll be talking to them soon,” Muriel said happily. She clapped her hands lightly. “Now how about we all get inside? We can give you all the grand tour and get you situated. It's actually lucky some of the girls aren't here, or someone would have to double up.”

“Um...” Jaune started to raise his hand, but Leon held up a finger, shaking his head.

“The house is full of full grown women now. We understand but... we'd rather not have the conversation out loud.”

“Right...” Jaune said, suddenly feeling younger than he actually was and not in a good way.

Ruby zipped past them to Muriel's side. “Grand tour? Does that include the forge? Blanche mentioned you guys running a forge? Is it a weapons forge? Do you make Hunter weapons here?”

Matte let out a roaring laugh and reached down to ruffle Ruby's hair. “You better believe it. Not like the local Huntsmen and Huntresses can just run off to Vale for repairs or replacements any time they need it, now can they? Nope. The Arc Metalworks is the place in Golden Fields for Hunter-grade weapons. And a few special designs for those of us without Aura. Come on, I'm sure you can get the house tour later.”

With a cheering Ruby hot on her heels, Matte started off toward the forge. “We'll catch up later, Mophead!”

Jaune winced at the nickname. Then behind him, he heard something that promised he wasn't the only one who was in for some embarrassment that weekend.

“So... since your other sisters aren't here, that means we're getting separate beds this time, right Gris?” Rey was saying. “Not saying the sleepover wasn't fun, but it's kind of awkward sleeping in the same bed as your partner under their parents' roof. Especially when you're not... you know... together. I'm sure you weren't exactly thrilled yourself. All I'm saying. Gris?”

The Huntress in training simply folded her arms behind her head, called up a miniature zephyr to help her navigate, and headed for the farmhouse.

“Gris! You're blind, not deaf!” Rey shouted, almost pleadingly before chasing after his partner.

Jaune watched them go, unable to keep from voicing his thoughts to Pyrrha. “I know there's a spare bedroom, plus I wasn't here so...”

“That's another reason why we don't have that conversation,” Leon said, sidling up on his other side. “Poor oblivious kid. If he wasn't a faunus, I'd be worried we were related.”

Thanking his lucky stars that he and his father were speaking easily so quickly, Jaune raised an eyebrow. “You went through something like that with Mom?”

“Probably worse. Your mother wasn't half as personable as Gris.” Jaune shivered at the very idea.
Leon gave him a sidelong look, then asked. “Was it like that with you and...”

“The obliviousness was actually quite mutual, sir.” Pyrrha offered, making Jaune remember that he and Rey were on the same boat this trip.

“Parcheesi!” Nora crowed, jumping up from the table and lifting her hands in victory. “I am victorious once more! Another sad soul falls victim to the Odindottir!”

Blake looked down at the Go board, then slowly back up at the cheering Goddess. “What are you doing?”

“Gloating! Friend Yang taught me that braggadocio and lighthearted taunts along with optional suppositions about your opponent's mother's sexual history are part of a ritual to build the bonds of camaraderie.”

“Oh she did, did she?” Blake said, a twitching eyebrow the only evidence of her mood. “And why did you shout Parcheesi?”

Nora frowned and cocked her head. “Is it not part of the rules to shout the name of the game when one wins?”

“That's only for Yahtzee. Also, this game's Go. Parcheesi was two games ago.” Blake could feel a vein starting to throb in her forehead. The damnedest thing was that Nora had won. Handily. After struggling with the concept of spinning a spinner.

“Ah. My thanks for the information.” Nora dropped back into her seat, then banged the table with her palm so hard everything on it jumped. “Another game then?”

Using two fingers to massage the bridge of her nose, Blake sighed. “Let's go see how close Ren is to having dinner ready, okay?”

Before Nora could respond, a tone sounded, followed by Glynda's voice. “A scheduled visitor has arrived. Weiss Schnee of the Schnee Dust Company. I am conducting her to the garage.”

“Scheduled visitor? Why would Jaune schedule a visit from Weiss when he knew he'd be gone?” Blake looked to Nora, then immediately realized she wasn't going to get her answers there. Luckily, Glynda spoke up.

“Mr. Arc did not make this appointment. Ms. Nikos did.”

“Well that just raises even more questions.”

“Apologies, but I'm not at liberty to share anymore information on this visit with you. Ms. Schnee will be at the garage entrance shortly.”

Blake scowled and got up from her seat. “Fine. I'll go let her in.”

“Is not this Weiss your friend?” Nora asked, rising as well. “You don't seem very happy to have her visit. I'm always happy to see my friends—especially Ren. When I saw him for the first time since I first left Midgard, I was the happiest I've ever been. Is that unusual for your people?”

Then she stopped, rubbing her chin as she mused on the situation. “Then again, I've heard talk of this Schnee. Her family is not to be trusted, yes? Is that why you're unhappy to see her?”
“Look,” Blake said, holding up her hands as if to ward off the torrent of words. “Things between me and Weiss are... complicated. But more importantly, I'm not comfortable letting other people into Jaune's house when he's not here—especially not the daughter of his greatest business rival. He put a lot of trust having us here and frankly, I don't see any reason for him to have.”

She made her way toward the garage entrance with Nora following. The Thunder Goddess nodded along with her reasoning. “I see. Then we should do our best to maintain a close eye on this Schnee. Perhaps if you tied a rope or chain around her waist. I happen to know some dwarves...”

“We're not putting Weiss on a leash.” Blake deadpanned. “If we're going to leash any of my friends, it's going to be Yang anyway. We'll just ask Weiss why she's here. That's all. Oh, and remember: no telling her about anything we've done or have been doing. I know our secrecy is leaking like a sieve and Weiss already knows about SHIELD, but we most certainly don't need that information getting back to her father. He's.... okay well he's quite possibly the worst person on remnant—and I say this having spent the last few months undercover with terrorists.”

“An excellent point. I've heard of this Wilhelm Schnee and agree that he is as cold as the Cask of Endless Winter. Your secret is safe with me.”

“Perfect,” Blake said, reaching for the door while not believing for a second that Nora could keep a secret. It wasn't as if she could knock her out and drag her into a closet, so she was forced to roll the dice. With a sigh of resignation, she pulled the door open. “Hello, Weiss. Didn't expect to see you again so soon,” she said, doing her best to sound upbeat.

Weiss put on a diplomatic smile. “Blake. I didn't expect to see you so soon either. So Yang convinced you to join the team after all?”

Blake smiled a little easier, “You know how she is: both the irresistible force and the immovable objects all rolled into one.”

The Schnee heiress looked away. “I really do wish I was able to join as well. I miss being part of Team RWBY rather than just one tiny piece of the giant machinery of the SDC.”

“From what I can tell, the door's still open whenever you want to jump ship.” Blake stepped back, gesturing to her, “Come in. You know Nora of course.”

“Hello, Lady Schnee!” Nora waved with both hands.

“Hello.” Weiss said, cringing a little from the redhead's over-exuberance.

“So... what brings you here?” Blake finally asked what she wanted to from the moment she opened the door.

“Pyrrha asked me here, actually,” explained Weiss. “She needs me to perform an analysis on an exotic form of Dust Arc Industries discovered. My father would kill me if he knew I was doing this, but I do owe Pyrrha a few favors. Incidentally, for whatever reason, she wants me to keep this from Jaune until the final results are in, so if you'd indulge me?”

Chapter End Notes

Well this certainly was a long time coming. We've finally gotten the Arc family back
together and boy did I agonize over how to do it. I decided that things would go rather easily. If Jaune's father is anything like him, there wouldn't be any malice or bad blood over it, just apologies and attempts to get past it as quickly as possible.

Yes, I did put a couple of sisters on a bus to make it easier to properly characterize the truckload of characters introduced here. If you've been paying attention to my other works in the RWBY fandom, you'll notice that (again), the names and personalities line up across AUs.

I think this is the first time we've had Muriel named though. Muriel is a Celtic name meaning Sky. Sky blue. Color names still enforced.

Something I've noticed a lot in fics that use the Arc family is that they tend to make them all unimaginable badasses with the sisters all being Huntresses, sort of ignoring that Jaune somehow came out of this household not knowing what Aura was or even what Mistral—and entire freaking continent—was. I'm trying to address that here with having his home town being incredibly remote. The forge is a new addition.

By the way, the fact that it's named Arc's Metalworks is a nod to a fic of the same name by Dyde21. Its a sweet little Arkos AU where Jaune never went to Beacon and was instead a clerk at his family's metalworks in Vale. Check it out.

Then we have the other side of this arc kicking off with a rare character pairing: Blake and Nora. Seeing as Blake/Yang works a lot like Ren/Nora in terms of dynamics, it was fun swapping them and playing with the fact that Blake doesn't have Ren's patience or ability to shrug off Nora-isms. Writing Nora as Thor is tons of fun too.

And so Weiss is here too and Our Heroes have no idea what she's been through.

I will say one thing: Weiss is telling the truth about being invited. Remember that they have recently come across a new type of Dust, after all.

Next Chapter: An Arc family dinner, Ruby plays with things that are also guns, and Weiss forgets her purse.
Blake gave Weiss a level look. “Let me get this straight: just a couple of weeks after your father declared war on Jaune's company, you expect me to believe that Pyrrha went behind his back and asked you to do a Dust analysis for her. Weiss, exactly how many levels of stupid do you take me for?”

“Do you honestly believe I would have so little respect for you that I would make up something so outrageous? I'm hurt, Blake. Really I am.”

The faunus woman refused to back down, folding her arms. “Actually, I don't. But at the same time, I have my doubts that you wouldn't at least try if your father put you up to it. That, and all things considered, I doubt Pyrrha would want to give up Arc Industries secrets to anyone right now.”

“Oh!” Nora popped up from behind Blake, looking pleased with herself. “You might say she has a feeling deep in the pit of her chest about it.”

Both the B and the Y of Team RWBY paused at that and as one chorused, “What?”

Nora blinked at both of them. “Isn't that the saying? Feeling things deep in the pit of your chest. Only it's even more appropriate because Pyrrha has a machine in her chest from last time someone got Arc Industries secrets.”

“I... think you mean 'in the pit of her stomach',” said Weiss.

“No, that doesn't make sense. She means 'deep in her heart',” reasoned Blake.

“That's the one!” Nora chirped.

Weiss wrinkled her nose. “Either way it's in poor taste. The poor woman was maimed.” She glared at Nora, intent on rubbing in the guilt, but Nora just stood there smiling at her until she relented. “Anyway, you can check with Jaune's computer. Regardless of whom I work for, I am also an independent Dust expert—one of the foremost in my field. Whatever this sample is she wants analyzed, she seems to think it's worth the risk.”

“And why would she hide that from Jaune?” Blake challenged.

“I assume because he disagrees that it's worth that risk to make sure this sample is handled with the utmost accuracy. Perhaps it's potentially dangerous. It is her job to ensure his safety, and given recent events, she has an even greater motive to do so.” Weiss pursed her lips. “Look, I understand you're upset with me, but you can't really believe I would do such a thing to them, can you?”

Blake continued looking at her with hard eyes for a few moments before she cast her gaze downward. “I've... the last few years haven't done a lot to help me trust people easily. The White Fang is bad enough, but SHIELD is full of nested secrets upon secrets and double agents have always been a danger.”

“Combine that with our... history... especially when it comes to my father and I can see how it's a perfect cocktail for suspicion,” finished Weiss for her. “I understand. But please, just check?
Believe it or not, I really do want to help them in whatever way is still open to me. I'll be working in an isolated virtual work space without access to anything but my own data archives and the ones Pyrrha set aside for me. Even if I wanted to do something underhanded, I won't have the opportunity.”

Slipping her purse off her shoulder, she set it on the side table next to the door. “I'll even leave my purse and scroll up here, far out of reach of any nefariousness.”

A sigh escaped Blake and her ears drooped. “Fine. But I'm going to make sure personally that your work space is isolated.” She wrung her hands as she finally stepped aside to allow her former teammate into the house. As Weiss passed, she spoke up again. “Listen... I hate how things have gotten between us. The others... and I miss you. And if you you ever do decide to join the team... I want you to know I'd be happy to have you back. So if that's what's holding you back...”

The white-haired woman lowered her head. “I wish I could, but I can't for now. My father has been much more demanding of my time since the ball; he assumes I have much more knowledge about Jaune's business than I actually do and it takes all my effort to mitigate his wrath.”

“So you actually are trying?”

“More than you know,” Weiss said with a weary sigh. “I really do consider Jaune a friend, you know? As much as he's infuriated me over the years; he actually reminds me of Ruby in that aspect. I am very much not in favor of my father's plans for him coming to fruition.”

Blake swallowed and nodded. Still, she refused to let her guard down. “Glynda? She queried, closing the door behind Weiss, “Can you give me the details of Weiss's appointment?”

“Yes, of course I can. The number one virtual console room has been prepared with a self-contained full spectrum analysis rig, recorders and a custom data archive. All digital access to the room has been physically disabled and wireless signals blocked. The room is also a clean room: Miss Schnee will be required to change into a designated set of scrubs and nothing from inside the room is to be taken with her. The subject of the analysis is designated Unidentified Dust Sample UKN-2214.”

“Did Pyrrha really ask for this to be kept secret from Jaune?”

“This consultation is part of a locked archive file created by Miss Nikos under the authority provided by Mr. Arc. While Mr. Arc has Administrator level access and can access the file at will, the archive has been designated to not be referenced to Mr. Arc until the archive's related project is marked either complete or scrapped.”

Blake wished there was a monitor or something for her to glare at when it came to Jaune's household computer. As it was, she ended up squinting up at a corner of the ceiling. “Did she leave a reason why Jaune isn't supposed to know about it?”

“Only that it was a 'secret'. If it helps, her tone was light at the time and she was humming, suggesting that this designation does not have any dire consequences.”

Again, Blake wanted something to glare at. That kind of behavior didn't happen in SHIELD. Nobody kept 'fun' secrets there. The last time she'd dealt with this kind of thing was a long time ago when Ruby was planning a birthday party for Yang. It's been so long ago that the possibility of such a thing slipped her mind.

“Seems your story checks out,” she droned to Weiss. “I'll take you down to the labs then.” After a beat, she added, “If you want, you can stay for dinner once you're done. Ren is a pretty amazing
cook.” She managed what she hoped was a friendly smile at her offer of consolation for her suspicious behavior.

Weiss ducked her head and returned the smile. “I’d like that. Thank you. I’m not certain how long this will take, but it shouldn’t take more than two hours.”

Nora made a squealing noise. “Excellent! A friendship is mended! I’ll go tell Ren to make twice as much for dinner tonight!”

“Twice? But I’m just one person,” Weiss stammered in the face of the other’s boisterousness.

“Yes, but now I’m extra hungry!” Nora declared, trotting off to find Ren.

Weiss watched her go. “That one gets more odd every time I meet her.”

“I would say you’ll get used to her, but I haven’t yet so...” Blake gestured for Weiss to follow her, making her way toward the stairs down to the lab. True to her word, Weiss sat her purse on the end table in the living room before joining Blake in descending.

“She reminds me a bit of Yang,” the heiress admitted. “Speaking of; how are Yang and Ruby doing in your... endeavor?”

The cat faunus glance back up at her old friend, her neutral mask slipping slightly toward concern. “Ruby didn't tell you everything already?”

It didn't pass Blake's notice that Weiss pointedly avoided her gaze, looking distinctly uncomfortable. “I'm persona non-grata when it comes to this subject because of my father, remember? Ruby hasn't told me anything since all this started. Ruby... hasn't spoken to me since that night.”

This made Blake stop on the last stair, eyes widening with shock. “Not at all? Granted I've been out of the loop, but I was sure she kept in touch with you of all people.”

Weiss pressed her lips together. “Up until that night, you'd be right. But I haven't heard a word from Ruby since Ozpin formed your team. I shouldn't have been surprised: Jaune did tell Ruby she couldn't tell me about anything you're doing.”

“He never said she couldn't talk to you period.” Blake leaned against the banister, feeling off balance. “That's so unlike Ruby.”

Silence reigned for a few moments before Weiss started down the stairs again. “Yes. Well a lot of things are changing these days.” She huffed a sigh as she paused on Blake's level. “It's only been a short time but I miss talking with her. I miss all of you actually. I suppose it's no secret that I'm not still in Atlas because I enjoy it.”

“You have your loyalties.” Blake said automatically, then lowered her head, ashamed.

“Obligations aren't loyalties,” Weiss said, continuing to the bottom of the stairs where she stopped in front of the secure doors to the lab. Glancing back, she thought that maybe those obligations were still strong enough to keep her there.

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It had happened rather like a prey animal being separated from the herd by a pack of lions. They'd been getting the tour of the house led by Jaune's mother.
First, Jaune hung back, talking to Vert. The poor girl had been just as if not more affected than Gris by his apparent abandonment of the family. Rather than being angry though, she was elated and full of questions. Arc industries, the perpetual cloud of rumors that followed him, the kidnapping, but especially his growing hunch that Cinder had engineered the information blackout that kept the family from contacting him. Reassuring her that he was back in her life was going to take more than one weekend.

Then Gris had insisted on dropping off her and Rey's bags in her room. This had led to Yang breaking off to give the faunus youth a hard time about the situation. Leon was trying to intervene on his behalf. Meanwhile Blanche decided she needed to help Claire with dinner.

So by the time they reached the room at the end of the second floor hallway—Jaune's—Pyrrha was alone with Muriel Arc.

The Arc matriarch pushed the door open and flicked on the light, leading her inside. “I... I always expected he'd come home eventually. So I cleaned the place up, but I didn't change anything,” she said as a way of explaining the neatly arranged action figures, the stacked white comic boxes, and the Pumpkin Pete duvet on the bed.

Pyrrha gravitated to a particular row of action figures. With her rigorous training, she hadn't had any toys since she was very young, but that didn't mean she hadn't window-shopped a bit a long time ago. She recognized both the toy and the subject. The Hunters of Legend collection. One of them depicted a bear of a man with a stout muscular figure, and truly epic mustache, carrying a blunderbuss with a double-bladed ax head fitted to the stock. She couldn't help but smile: Peter Port had been one of her instructors at Beacon. “Quite the collection.”

“Jaune became interested in Hunters late.” Muriel discretely pushed the door closed. “We were actually relieved that he wasn't interested in the profession when it was time to choose a Primary school for him.”

“You... didn't want him to become a Hunter?” That struck her as odd. From what she knew of the Arc family, they had a long and stories history as Hunters, soldiers—leaders of men dating back to before the Great War. They were also a selfless and altruistic family, always wanting to do what was right even if it wasn't what was smart.

Muriel must had caught her confusion in her tone. “I see Jaune did talk to you about us at least.”

“Often,” Pyrrha assured her. “I know that being estranged for a decade might seem proof to the contrary, but he loves you all deeply.”

A small hum that Pyrrha couldn't read escaped Muriel. “Then it might sound out of character for us to want to keep Jaune from being a Hunter. My family line has traditions almost as strong as well and believe me, we would have liked nothing more than Jaune taking up that tradition... but there were more important things to consider.”

Pyrrha caught her guarded tone. “Something you don't wish to share outside the family. I understand.”

“What are your intentions with my son?” The turn was so sudden and sharp that Pyrrha almost stumbled.

“I...” she started.

“We may be disconnected from the rest of Vale out here, but I do know something about you, Miss
Nikos,” said Muriel flatly. “You were famous once. More than Jaune is now. I remember seeing your picture on cereal boxes. News of you possibly becoming the first person to not only sweep their home regional tournament and the Vytal Festival reached all the way out here.” She paused to collect herself. “Gris wanted to become a Huntress because of you.”

That made Pyrrha's eyes widen. “She never said...” then she stopped herself. Gris had gone to Sanctum because of her. Sanctum, where she'd had the accident that blinded her. “Oh my...”

“I don't blame you for that,” Muriel added quickly. “It was an accident, and the whole thing's only made Gris more determined.” She laughed softly, a bit rueful. “She wants to surpass you. It's her whole reason for competing in the Vytal tournament.”

When Pyrrha had nothing to say to this, Muriel gingerly took a seat on the bed, clasping her hands together in her lap. “So no, that has nothing to do with why we're having this conversation. A mother worries, you see. I worry when a woman who has faded from a lifestyle of wealth and celebrity attaches herself to my son—who himself possesses that lifestyle. You understand where I would be concerned?”

It wasn't hard to see exactly where the older woman was coming from. Over the last three years, long before their relationship began, that very same accusation had made its way into the tabloids more than once. She and Jaune had laughed at it because they knew what everyone else didn't: that there was nothing she wanted less in life than to return to the limelight.

She shuffled her feet with uncharacteristic shyness. “I'm not certain how I can give you any genuine assurances, Mrs. Arc. I will admit that when I was offered the job to be Jaune's bodyguard, I was excited for the chance to work with the Jaune Arc, but not the billionaire, the man whose creations were changing the world for the better. Over the years, I've grown fond not of the center of every tabloid's attention, but the man who celebrates major breakthroughs with Mistrali takeout and who takes such joy in creating things. And I've come to love the man who is so genuine and kind and who puts in all for others. The man to whom I literally owe my heart.”

Muriel regarded her for a long moment before giving her a slow nod. “You sound like you truly feel that. And you're right; I can't be entirely certain.” She fell silent for several beats, continuing to search Pyrrha's eyes for any spark of dishonesty. At length, she relented. “I suppose since you did save his life from the White Fang, I can give you the benefit of the doubt and... perhaps some day welcome you into the family.”

“I would like that.” Pyrrha said with a warm smile. “And to continue being honest, we saved one another during the kidnapping. Jaune did far, far more than he allowed the press release to say. I would not be standing here speaking to you if not for him.”

“He very much is his father's son,” said Muriel fondly. Rising primly, she swiftly composed herself. “I'll get some... less childish covers for the bed. Leon was in the middle of fixing dinner when you arrived, so we can eat shortly. I hope I haven't made you too uncomfortable.”

Pyrrha inclined her head. “On the contrary. I was worried when we came here. Nervous, of course, that you wouldn't like me. But I was more concerned that reuniting with the rest of his family would be like the one he had with Gris. I'm not sure he could take that.”

A small, sad expression crossed Muriel's face. “Gris and Verte were hurt most of all in this. Leon's a grown man, he could handle the guilt and pain, but they were only children. Gris got angry, Verte convinced herself he'd be back at any moment.” She sighed. “I hope that now that he's back, they'll both find balance.”
“Oh, I’m sure they will.”

An deuce of clubs, flaring with pink-tinged yellow energy, landed on top of a rock in the farmyard. It sat there, sparking for a fraction of a second before exploding with a loud ‘pop’.

“Wow! That is so cool!” Jaune was sitting on the stoop by the front door while Verte perched on the rail, a deck of playing cards in hand. She drew the ace of spades next, idly flipping it between her fingers. “But aren't the gloves supposed to keep that from happening.”

The youngest Arc shrugged. “Well without them, anything that's not living I touch with my fingertips will blow up. The green Dust keeps that from happening, but if I concentrate, I can light things up through them. To illustrate, she ignited the ace and took a moment to study it.

“Cards are good. I know how long it takes for them to go boom, I'm getting better and better at throwing them, and you get fifty-two in a pack plus jokers and the rules cards. She flicked the card away to where it exploded in air a good ten yards away.

“You ended up getting a pretty cool Semblance, sis!” Jaune said brightly. It didn't get past him that Verte let out a confused little grunt at that. “What?”

Verte started shuffling the remaining deck as she fidgeted in place. “It's weird. I mean it's one thing to have a Semblance you can't control—that's rare enough, but no one's ever had a Semblance without having their Aura unlocked.”

It was as if the record that was Jaune's train of thought started skipping as his brain processed that little piece of information. True, he'd grown up knowing absolutely nothing about the finer points of Hunters, Aura and Dust. He'd gotten as far as being one airship trip short of actually entering Beacon Academy without even knowing was Aura was for Dust's sake. But in the intervening decade, he'd learned quite a lot just by being around the many former and current Huntresses in his life.

There'd also been a great deal more study done on Aura and Semblance in that time. Semblances were still a mystery though: some were passed down along family lines, others seemed connected to the personality of the manifester. Most were fueled by Aura, while others seemed to require no power source. Dust could enhance some of them, and some were so esoteric that they defied scientific explanation.

Ruby's Uncle Qrow for example. Not only was he one of only a handful of people with an uncontrolled Semblance, but his power manipulated luck: a concept that could neither be truly observed nor quantified.

But all Semblances—every single one from Qrow's 'bad luck', to the famous Schnee Glyphs—manifested after the subject's Aura was unlocked. No one in the recorded history of Remnant had ever had a Semblance without unlocking their Aura first.

Come to think of it; from what he'd heard, very few people with an unlocked Aura failed to develop a Semblance and yet here he was, more than a month out from his own Aura being unlocked and... nothing. He'd been so focused on other things, he'd never stopped to think on that.

“You know what's really weird though?” Verte's voice shook him out of his thoughts. Without waiting for him to guess, she elaborated. “I'm not the only one. There's like three other kids at school here that have the same thing going on. One of my friends! She kissed her girlfriend and put
her in a coma!"

“A coma?” Jaune parroted dumbly. His mind was racing. Why wasn't this all over the news? Golden Fields was remote and communication between it and the greater Kingdom was spotty to be generous, but this sort of thing was something the whole world should be hearing about.

“She woke up a few days later, but Ivy's mom took her out of school after that. Hers is pretty bad. I mean mine just works through my fingers, but anyone that touches Ivy gets... hurt.” Showing amazing balance, Verte folded her legs up to her chest and rested her chin on her knees. “I miss her.” Unsaid, but clear in her posture and averted gaze added 'I missed you too'.

Rising from where he was sitting, Jaune patted her on the back. “I know. But look: after dinner, I'm going to make a few calls and we're going to get the best doctors and Aura specialists around to look into this. And—hey, maybe unlocking your Aura might give you control. Maybe if Pyrrha did for you what she did for me—or maybe I can do it for you.”

He was rambling and even with the seriousness of the situation, it made Verte smile into her knees. She remembered that from back in the good old days when sometimes she'd ask what she thought were innocent questions that left her big brother flustered and unable to do anything but babble.

“Hey Jaune?” She finally cut him off.

“Hmm?”

“Are you really back? I mean I know you're here now, but once you go back to Vale are you going to come back?”

Jaune blinked, the implications of her question slowly sinking in. Last time he'd promised he'd be back for the winter break and she'd never heard from him again. “Wha—yeah. Yes, of course, Vert. I'm—I missed you all too much and too long to lose touch with any of you again, okay? In fact, I was going to wait until later but...”

He reached into his coat's inner pocket and came up with a handful of Arc Industries scrolls—bulkier than the standard model, each with a unique color pattern and bearing not only the iconic Arc double crescent, but an artist's representation of what the planet must look like from space. He plucked the green scroll from the rest and held it out to her, pocketing the rest.

She took it with a curious glint in her eye. “Is this...”

He nodded. “You are the very first owner of a brand new Arc Industries Satellite Scroll. A good five months before they become available, actually. The satellites aren't even on the Arc Network yet, but you can still call me anytime you want. No more having to travel to the next town to connect to the CCT, no more being out of the loop. And no more obstructions keeping you from talking to me. If you ever think I've been gone too long again now you can tell me directly to get my ass home for the weekend.”

Verte stared at the scroll for a long while before finally opening it to look over the device's various screens. “I've never had a scroll of my own before. And this one's special? Ohmigosh can I show my friends at school?” She launched off the railing and enveloped her big brother in a tight hug.

“Of course.” Jaune gladly returned the embrace. “It's yours after all. With all the family's numbers already programmed in plus Pyrrha, Ruby and Yang just in case you can't reach me for some reason. And Vert?”

“Hmm?” Verte didn't seem about to let go of him anytime soon, face buried as it was in his
shoulder.

“I’m sorry.”

Chapter End Notes

I almost didn't write this chapter. My original plan here was to write Weiss coming into the compound and what happened there, then the Arc family dinner and the first part of Jaune calling and confronting Cinder. But after writing the Weiss segment with Blake, I felt like this would do well as an emotional impact chapter, since there were a few other relationships to establish and reestablish before we moved on.

Having Jaune's mom put Pyrrha on the spot was part of the rough outline from the start, but it turned into something of a praise line for Jaune because some people have rightly called out the fact that I'm pretty had on Jaune here and in Game On. This is mostly because I've been on the Jaune end of the sort of relationship he and Pyrrha have in canon and... well I'm projecting a bit. I'll let up off the guy for a bit.

Verte's power and the weird Semblances are part of the set-up for the X-men spin-off a lot of people want me to write and I may actually get to at some point. Obviously, she's Gambit—my favorite superhero of all time by the way—and the classmate Ivy she's referring to is Rogue. The plot I've got roughed out in my head would be Verte and Gris on a sisterly road trip to save Ivy from Remnant's version of Weapon Plus, an offshoot of the Aura-transfer/generation/manipulation research Ironwood's been doing in canon.

And finally, I have to be serious for a moment here. I'm not sure how often I'll be updating after this. You see after a completely awful year of ever-growing hardship, my mother passed away. On top of just struggling to get into the right headspace to write, I've got a lot of things on my plate now and I might have to give up my professional writing career to keep the rent paid, much less my fanworks.

But I do write to get my mind off things (you know, like the time I started Arc Reaction itself because my mother was hospitalized), so we can assume there will be a next time...

Next Chapter: Sinister things go down at the Arc Network, Jaune has some choice words for Cinder, and Cinder puts her Endgame into motion.
The sound of mecha-shift gears working filled the small test range at the back of the foundry. A reinforcing sheath of carbon steel extended down the barrel of the shotgun Ruby was holding, along with a wood and rubber hand-grip. The stock split in half to unfold a fan of Earth Dust-reinforced metal that locked into a crescent shape—an ax head. On the back of the ax head, a trio of barrels extended a short distance.

The younger of the two Patch sisters gave the weapon a few experimental swings, then took aim at an iron testing bar. Taking one mighty swing, she hit the trigger panel on the grip at the same time, firing off three Dust charges from the rear-facing barrels at the same time.

With a harsh sheering noise, the ax cut cleanly through the six-inch thick bar. Its momentum carried it down and around as Ruby, no stranger to using hewing weapons, carried it through a full arc and back into a guard position.

Grinning from ear to ear, Ruby triggered another mecha-shift. The ax-head retracted and the stock folded down while the reinforcements and the barrel they were protecting both shrank back, turning the ax-gun into a sawed off ax-gun. One-handing the heavy weapon through the enhancing power of Aura, Ruby took aim downrange and fired on one of the targets there, scoring five bulls-eyes in a row.

One more transformation extended the main barrel and the main body of the stock. Now holding the gun in both hands, Ruby finished off the magazine with ten shots; one into each of the targets.

“Nicely done, Little Red!” Matte applauded from behind the ballistics shield situated behind Ruby. “You really know your way around a weapon.”

Ruby blushed at the praise, idly fiddling with the unfamiliar device in her hands. “Well thanks. I am a Huntress after all.” She stared down at the gun. “Y’know? It’s funny: this is only the second time I’ve seen a gun-ax. Not a very common weapon.”

Matte came out from behind the shield and took back the weapon, quickly checking to make sure the mag and chamber were empty. “Huh. Only my second time too—and the other time for me was the specs for the one this is a replacement for. That one was a blunderbuss and an ax though. The ax didn't even collapse either. The owner just kept it from cutting him through sheer Aura. At least that's what his friend who commissioned this said.”

Ruby was about to comment that the last ax-gun she'd seen was also a blunderbuss, but something curious struck her. “Hey, how is it you know all about Aura and work with Hunters and stuff? Jaune's always said he learned about that stuff from his coworker at AIM. I always figured he was from a super-remote place like this not to know, but you know, so what gives?”

Pausing in her inspection of the weapon, Matte's demeanor changed from the boisterous, Yang-like one Ruby had come to know to something more somber.

“It's... sort of a family secret. And yeah, I get that Jaune considers you guys family, but it's probably not my place to tell, especially since Jaune doesn't know. So I won't tell you the whole thing, just this: Since our Uncle Braun isn't going to be having and biological kids, Jaune's the last
male of the Arc blood. Because of that, our parents worked very hard to keep him safe—trying to hide every-thing about being a Hunter from him for most of his life.”

“But why—?”

“Like I said, not my place. But after Jaune left... and once it was clear he wasn't coming back, the unofficial Huntsman topic ban was lifted and we started taking orders from Huntsmen at the forge. I learned most of what I know from them.” Matte shrugged.

Ruby was about the reply when a commotion out outside got both their attention.

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“So then Clare came in, totally steamed and told me and Gris we were never allowed to joust with marshmallow peeps in the microwave again.”

Jaune laughed at Verte's latest story while leaning back on his palms looking up at the clear sky. “Wow, sounds like you guys still got up to all sorts of wacky stuff even without me while you were kids.”

Verte snorted. “Kids nothing. That was when Gris came home to visit this Spring.” They both shared a laugh at this before Verte had another question. “Um... I've wanted to ask since you got here... what was it like when the the White Fang kidnapped you?” She looked away, “You don't have to talk about it if it's too painful.”

“It's fine. In fact I'm surprised none of you have asked yet.” He sat up only to fold his arms around his stomach and fold himself over them. “As to how it was? I'd be lying to say it wasn't scary, especially in hindsight. What I remember most though is being angry. See, they really hurt Pyrrha and were trying to hold her life over me to make me do what they wanted.”

So rapt in his words, Verte almost fell off the railing. “What did you do?” she asked with reverence.

“I... built something,” So many people knew about the powered armor and the team now that Jaune was just about ready to give up and blab the whole thing. But the thing was he'd just come back and promised her that he wasn't leaving forever again. How could he then turn around and tell her he was undertaking something as dangerous as this whole SHIELD business? So he smoothed the story over in much the same way a glacier smooths a continent. “It helped us fight our way out.”

“What kind of thing did you build?”

Because of course she'd ask that. Jaune groaned internally, only to be saved by heavy footsteps approaching along with the tail end of a conversation.

“--such a terrible idea! This isn't challenging Marigold or even the second years. She's been a Huntress longer than you've been training to be a Huntress! Almost as long as we've been training combined!”

He turned to find Rey hanging off Gris's coat, arguing desperately with her. His sister was in her hunting garb; the outfit she originally wore to the Arc compound. Rey was wearing a short purple coat with a light blue armored undershirt, matching pants, and soft boots. The sword he'd had at the compound was on his back. A pair of rings, studded with dust crystals sat on the middle and ring fingers of his left hand.

Behind them came Pyrrha, dressed the familiar cuirass and bronze plates of her own hunting garb.
It was an unwritten rule that any traveling hunter keep their gear on hand just in case a Grimm attack should hit where they happened to be. In fact, Jaune had not only the Star Brand along, but had brought Crocea Mors out of habit even though he'd never officially become a Huntsman. However, no alarms had sounded and instead of looking battle ready, Pyrrha looked self conscious, nervous and a little annoyed.

After Pyrrha came Jaune's parents. And speaking of Crocea Mors, that very weapon was in his father's hands.

Scrambling to his feet, Jaune balked at the procession coming outside. “What's going on here?”

Rey detached himself from Gris to stop in front of Jaune. “Bad choices! Terrible, no good, very bad choices! Gris challenged Pyrrha to a spar before dinner! You can stop this, right? Please say you can stop this!”

“I...” Jaune started, but Rey wasn't done.

“You don't understand—she wanted it to be a doubles match!”

That stopped Jaune in his tracks. “Say what now?” As reasonable as it was in his opinion that Rey was concerned to be facing Pyrrha even in a spar, Jaune himself was not looking forward to facing his sister given the anger she'd been fostering over her abandonment. In fact, even squaring off against Rey was a losing prospect without his armor seeing as he was the equivalent of something less than a first year hunter in training when it came to wielding Crocea Mors.

“Don't worry, Jaune.” Pyrrha had come to stand beside him, placing a calming hand on his shoulder. He recognized the fake smile she plastered on as the one she wore whenever she was cornered by a zealous fan or reporter; all strained and plastic. She didn't want to do this, but was going through with it because Gris was his sister. “It's just a spar. We won't be doing anything that will do any real harm.”

“You don't have to do this, you know,” he pointed out, “No matter how much Gris badgers you, no one is going to be all that upset if you say no.”

Pyrrha shook her head. “It's fine. Your sister seems to have developed a sort of one-sided rivalry with me. If this satisfies her, who am I to say no?”

“The person she's harassing?” Rey suggested, raising his hand like a student in class. “Also, I mean you could point out it's hardly a fair fight. I mean we're second years. Even if our semblances were epic and our weapons the strongest ever, going up against any trained Hunter, much less you, this is going to be a curb-stomp.”

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than his back stiffened at the sudden appearance of his partner behind him. “You're too modest for your own good sometimes, Gris. There's a reason for the partner system beyond having someone to watch your back and provide emotional support you know? You're supposed to make up for each other's weaknesses—like for example someone who is cautious to a fault for someone who's overconfident.” He shrugged expansively. “But if you're going to insist on learning this lesson the hard way, I'm not going to stand in the way. But you'll have to leave Rey out of it—I have to borrow Jaune a moment, so there'll be no double's match.”
Gris frowned, but ducked her head in submission before turning to Pyrrha with a defiant grin. “I'm okay with that as long as you promise not to go easy on me. Being the Girl Without Fear is nice and all, but I'm after your title. I want to be the next Invincible Girl.”

The fake smile slowly became a bit more genuine as Pyrrha inclined her head. “I wouldn't mind passing on that mantle to be honest, but it wouldn't be right to just let you take it. Very well then, let's both give it our all, shall we?”

Leaning over to Leon, Rey whispered, “Thanks for getting me off the hook, Mr. Arc. Fighting Grimm is one thing. Fighting my idol and the Invincible Girl at the same time? Not so much” The elder Arc nodded that he was welcome and after a beat, Rey added, “They're going to completely destroy your farm yard. You know that, right?”

“Claire or Matte can take care of that,” laughed Leon, clapping the young faunus on the shoulder. “So just enjoy the show—I'm sure we'll get a grand demonstration of skill vs raw power. Now if you'll excuse me, I wasn't lying about having to talk to Jaune.”

Rey nodded and headed across the yard to get a good seat in the shadow of the airship Jaune and the other had arrived in. Blanche, Muriel, Claire and Yang were already there. Somehow, Muriel had managed to serve drinks and popcorn in the short time she'd been out of their sight.

“So,” Leon twiddled Crocea Mors in his hands, studying it idly. “It's been a long time since I've seen this. Even longer since I've held it.”

“I'll understand if you want to take it back,” said Jaune, shuffling his feet.

Leon huffed out a laugh. “Of course not, son. It's yours. It's been your birthright since the day you were born.” He blew out a sigh. “It's just that... well this is the source of all our problems.” Jaune raised an eyebrow, but waited for his father to elaborate. “I should have explained all this to you the second you started talking about being a Hunter. I didn't because I figured it'd just be a phase and you'd give up once you realized you were too old to go to primary schooling.”

A frown crossed Jaune's face as it dawned on him exactly what 'troubles' his father was laying at the feet of their ancestral weapon: his estrangement from the family and failure at becoming a Huntsman all those years ago. “Dad... how...”

But Leon wasn't really listening to him at the moment. “Blanche told me your lady friend unlocked your Aura. During that whole mess with the White Fang, was it?” Jaune nodded, wondering where this tangent was going. “But I bet you're wondering why you haven't found your Semblance yet.”

Actually, Jaune hadn't. Oh, he'd looked into it, but he figured he just didn't employ his Aura enough, given his armor and weapons systems being designed to overcompensate for his lack of skill, for his Semblance to have a chance to emerge. Now, however, it was clear there was another reason.

“That would be because you... well I wouldn't say you don't have one, son, but rather you don't have one independent of Crocea Mors.”

Jaune opened his mouth, thought better than it, then decided his curiosity needed to be sated and finally asked, “My Semblance... is the family sword?”

At this, Leon let out a laugh. “No.” With a flick of his wrist, he swung the scabbard around, sending the sword flying out to tumble in the dust. Before Jaune could move to recover it or admonish Leon for abusing the weapon, he planted a hand on his son's chest, holding him at bay.
“the sword means nothing. It's been replaced more times than I can remember—I broke it twice in my time in Beacon. Once it was your mother who broke it during a spar.”

“Wait mom was a—” Jaune started, but Leon kept talking.

“No, it's the scabbard that's important. You remember the family motto, don't you?” With deft motions that belied his age, Leon flipped the scabbard around and activate its shield mode. “I am a child of House Arc,”

Automatically, Jaune joined in. “The Blood of King and Queens roars in these veins / By the jaundiced edge of this blade, we hewed a Kingdom from the Darkness / I stand. I live to push that Darkness back. / I stand. I live as a Guardian of Mankind.”

Leon brought the shield around into a guard position, knees bent, head lowered, body angled so that everything but his legs below the knees were behind the heater shield. “Those behind my Aegis will never perish from this world.”

He grinned. “Our ancestors were clever bastards. That last part is hidden in plain sight. Everyone assumed that the 'jaundiced blade' was the source of our line's power, when in reality, our line was the power behind the aegis.”

Jaune gave him a blank look. “And you've lost me. What now?”

Leon smiled and tossed the shield to his son. “Long before the war, back when our family was among the first to emigrate from Mantle to the new continent, one of our ancestors happened upon one of the old ways: a use of Dust that's long been lost. We've always had Aura in scads, so he bound his male bloodline to a rare Dust crystal embedded in this shield. No male Arc would ever be able to develop a Semblance, but in exchange, we got this: the Aegis.. Not an aegis. The Aegis; the object from which the word is derived. While your own this shield, it will always find its way back to you, your wounds will heal faster even than Aura allows, and if an attack is enough to destroy you outright, it will be turned back on its source.

“With it, your many times great grandmother Athena held a breech in the walls of what eventually became Vale for three days until reinforcements came to help. And your even more times great grandfather, Kennith was able to protect wayward travelers from a monster beyond even the Grimm.”

A brief flash of the giant divot carved out of the ground after the Juggernaut's finishing blow flitted through Jaune's head. Some things were making a lot more sense now.

Unaware of what his son was thinking, Leon continued, “When we ruled this land, it was using their shield on the front lines, protecting our allies with its full power and hiding that fact behind the story of the Yellow Death—a magic sword that doesn't exist.”

Now that was an interesting bit. Pyrrha used to tell him about how part of her reputation was thanks to using timing and theatrics to disguise the use of her Semblance, making her seem untouchable when in reality it was just physics working in her favor. Still, something was bothering him: “But... what's that have to do with me not becoming a Hunter? I mean with the Aegis, I'd have been able to take on any Grimm and keep my team safe. Why hide that? Why keep a power like this from the world?”

Len's expression grew dire. “Because we were trying to preserve it, Jaune. Not long after you turned one, your Uncle Braun had... an accident.”
“Uncle Braun with the funny walk... oh.”

“Right. I was the Hunter of the family and he went into the mercantile game. Didn't stop his caravan from being attacked... or him being gored by a Boarbatusk. He survived of course—still lives over in Shade, but he'll never be able to have children. That means you're the last male Arc. If you die before producing a male heir, there's nothing to power the Aegis and it'll be lost forever.”

Jaune swallowed, still processing what all that meant. “Whoa. So with Huntsmen being the job with the most horrifying rate of on-the-job casualties, I guess it's only natural me wanting to be a Huntsman was a bad thing.”

Shaking his head, Leon looked down to study the ground. “You have no idea how difficult it was for your mother and I to decide to try and protect you from a lifestyle we both hold in such high regard. In the end, I couldn't deny you. That's why I lied, you know? Because it was my fault you never had a chance and even if you didn't want special treatment, I had to do whatever I could to help you achieve the your dream. Even if that meant going back on my word.”

For a long moment, Jaune was speechless. Then, slowly, the words came at the same time he realized them. “You put this... Aegis thing at risk just to make me happy? Dad I never realized...”

“I know you didn't. But I should have told you. I should have come clean, but... I was worried that knowing what the Aegis could do it'd make you even more sure of what you wanted. That was stupid and—and wrong... but you have to understand, Jaune...”

“Of course I understand.” Jaune cut him off, staring at the shield—no, the Aegis. “Right now. Right while we're talking, I'm already trying to figure out how it works so I can maybe replicate it somehow. If I'd known this back then, nothing could have stopped me from going to Beacon.” He drew in a long breath. “You did the right thing. Maybe not the right way, but you did the right thing. I just wish...”

His eyes narrowed as a thought that had been bothering him came back. “... that we'd gotten in touch sooner. You say every time one of you tried to get in touch with you, you got stonewalled?”

“Every time,” said Leon. “I was too much of a coward to try and face you, but your mother and the girls all tried whenever they could. Verte's sent a message for you with every supply flight that comes into town and ever since she's been at Beacon, Gris visited your offices at least once a month.”

Jaune raised a finger. “I think I need to make a call.”

Just then, a strong wind tore past him, causing a commotion that pulled the attention of both remaining male Arcs toward the farmyard where Gris and Pyrrha had finished warming up and were now squaring off. Such was the commotion that they saw Ruby and Matte burst from the the Forge on the other side of the farmyard to see what was going on.

“After this?” Leon asked,

“After this, confirmed Jaune.

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“So are we ready then?” Gris smirked as she sank into a combat stance.

“Quite,” said Pyrrha, saluting with Milo before doing the same.
The wind between them picked up as Gris used her semblance to get a better look at her opponent and the battlefield. Her right hand closed over the hilt of her sword, Durendal as a hard expression settled over her countenance. “Then let's GO!”

She drew her sword, but made no move to charge or even approach her opponent. Instead, her left hand swept her scabbard from her sword belt and flipped it around. A quick series of clicks were the only warning of the scabbard's mecha-shifting, extruding a trigger and trigger guard. Deft, practiced fingers closed over the trigger and pulled, sending a powerful shotgun blast at Pyrrha. But not at her center mass where her shield was ready, but at her exposed shins.

The reveal of Durendal's second component was a surprise, but the time it took for Gris to aim was enough for Pyrrha to spot the barrel of the gun, track its aim, and sink into a crouch so Akouo caught the Dust-propelled slug. She followed by lifting the shield to catch an overhand sword stroke as Gris used a mighty gust of wind to launch herself into the fray.

What she wasn't prepared for was a sudden downdraft that let Gris drop to the ground far more quickly than expected and unleash a sweep kick that tripped the champion up.

Turning her fall into a cartwheel into a defensive crouch, Pyrrha was just in time to receive another shotgun blast followed by a series of overbearing sword strokes on Akouo. On the last impact, she lunged forward, bulling aside Gris's weapons to finally bring Milo into play, lashing out with the spear with a strike so swift that only a quick tilt of her head kept Gris from getting a nasty gash across her nose.

That was just the feint, however, as the second Gris's head was tilted, Pyrrha brought Akouo up for a shield bash.

Any other opponent would have taken a hit on the chin and had their bell rung, having had no way to see it coming. But Gris's 'vision' had nothing to do with her line of sight, and so a massive ball of air pressure gathered between the two combatants, hurling the second youngest Arc child back out of Pyrrha's reach.

She followed up with three more shots from her scabbard, two of which were dodged and the last of which was blocked by Akouo.

Pyrrha retaliated by spinning Milo around into its rifle mode and taking her own shots. Gris evaded by conjuring up a column of wind to catch the fold of her coat and lift her into the air, out of the path of the bullets. Another gale of wind hurled her forward.

A smirk of triumph painted itself on the ash blonde woman's face. There wasn't enough time for Pyrrha to mecha-shift her rifle back to a spear, but with her two-part weapon, Gris didn't have to do any shifting to bring her sword to bear.

The champion considered trying to get Milo in spear or xiphos mode, realized it would be futile, and instead reared back and threw Akouo like an over-sized discus. Gris called the wind to drive the shield off course, but a black energy rimed the bronze disc and it refused to stray, smashing into Gris's forehead and sending her flipping end over end until she struck the ground like a sack of potatoes.

With her opponent down, Pyrrha charged, switching Milo to xiphos mode for close combat.

Gris recovered quickly however, rolling to a crouch in time to receive the first blow with the flat of her sword. Rising as soon as the pressure was off, she went on the offensive, fencing with one hand and firing with the other, forcing Pyrrha to keep her shield busy so she couldn't use her favored
Caught on her back-foot, Pyrrha gave ground, trying to open some space between herself and Gris. When that didn't work, she rotated her shield arm just after Gris fired her shotgun scabbard, allowing the barrel to pass through the bouche—the semicircular notch she used to couch Milo in its rifle and spear forms—and then angled it to trap the weapon there.

While Gris was faster—though nowhere near as fast as Ruby, and had the advantage of all-around senses, Pyrrha just just plain stronger than the younger woman, so when she pitted her bicep and shoulder against Gris's fingers, there was no contest. Durendal's scabbard was wrenched free of its owner's grip and sent flying across the farmyard.

The motion left her wide open on her right side as she had to throw Akouo wide to pull it off, but Gris's shock almost made her miss it. Almost. Pivoting on her heel, Gris disengaged her blade from Milo and brought the pommel around, aimed for Pyrrha's brow.

It was too obvious a ploy, however, and Pyrrha merely cocked her head, letting the pommel strike go by before answering with a headbutt. While that was certainly not what her diadem was for, it made an excellent and painful striking surface that sent Gris reeling.

Holding her aching head with her newly empty hand, Gris stabbed out with Durendal and unleashed a powerful vortex on the champion with enough strength the halt the other's charge cold and start pushing her backward. Pyrrha set Akouo in front of her and dug in her heels, doing her level best to move forward against the wind.

She was so focused on soldiering forward against the raw force arrays against her, she didn't noticed the predatory grin that split Gris's face. Suddenly the wind that was battering her was gone—and so was the second-youngest Arc.

A crosswind caught Gris's coat and pulled her around the strafe to Pyrrha's right as the spartan stumbled under her own force with the wind gone. One more time, Gris triggered a minute mecha shift device, causing Durendal's hilt to double in length, then separate, leaving her holding her blade in one hand and a billy club in the other.

She wasn't done with surprises though as she whipped the end of the billy club toward Pyrrha, sending the former pommel lashing out at the end of a long cord to wrap around Pyrrha's legs. Then it was only a matter of a single powerful tug to draw the Invincible Girl's legs together, sending her to the ground.

“Golden chance!” Gris muttered to herself, using her Semblance to launch herself into the air with Durendal held high for the finishing blow.

Prone, Pyrrha could have tried to roll to evade, but all her combatant's eye saw was her own golden chance. Milo was designed for just this kind of situation: when you had to ward off an opponent from closing with you. Holding herself up with one arm, she flipped the xiphos around into a spear grip, drew back and threw while triggering her weapon's Dust charge.

Milo extended to spear mode at the same time the Dust propellant sent it flying and its mistress sheathed it in her Semblance.

Gris didn't even try to evade it: her aerodynamic senses telling her that Pyrrha's aim was just off the mark. If she'd been aiming to hit Gris, that is. The Girl Without Fear's triumph lasted just long enough for her to feel the tug on her coat. It was at that point she realized that the spear was caught in her coat and with the combined force of Dust, magnetic force and Pyrrha's own strength, she
was being dragged backward through the air.

By the time she put all this together, the shadow of Jaune's private airship had fallen over her. Then the world flashed black as her head struck the rear landing strut of the ship. Evidently, Milo had gone through the open structure of the strut while she, being too large to go through, had not.

Then Akouo smacked her in the face.

“Was that too hard? I'm sorry!”

Gris could only groan in response.

As she hung there, wallowing in her defeat, Gris heard Yang saying, “Welp. That was a thing. Here's your twenty lien, ring-tail.”

After a brief struggle, Gris managed to wriggle around to shoot a glare at her partner. It only lasted a moment because, well he had warned her. Then she gave an askance look to Yang.

The blonde shrugged. “I figured she'd go easy on you because you're her boyfriend's sister.”

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After taking time to congratulate the victor and console the loser, Jaune excused himself inside so he could make a long-overdue call.

“Hello. You've reached the scroll of -Cinder Fall- . -Cinder Fall- cannot take your call at the moment. Please leave a message at the--” Jaune hung up, glared at the s roll in his hand, then pulled up his personal console to the Arc Network.

It didn't take long for him to find Cinder's personal scroll on the Network and locate it in the Arc Industries offices. A bit more work called up the operating and file systems of her scroll, where he swiftly located and disabled the program set to automatically redirect calls from any of his numbers to voice mail.

With that done, he could have just called her, but instead, he used the network itself to ring her phone using the ID of the front desk.

After a few rings...

“What is it now? I just got out of a meeting.”

“We need to talk, Cinder. Do you know where I am right now?”

“I'm going to guess not in your basement tinkering like a good little boy.”

Normally, Jaune let Cinder's jabs roll off his back, but he wasn't in the mood to give her the benefit of the doubt any more. “I'm in Golden Fields. Where my family lives. You know, the people you've been keeping away from me for almost a decade?”

Cinder laughed. “Is that what this is about? Talk about the last horse crossing the finish line.”

“Don't laugh at that!” Jaune almost shouted. “This is my family we're talking about. Why would you do something like this?!”

“Well obviously because they would have been a distraction. And once what I'd hoped to be a vengeful, murderous Huntress I hired to be your body guard turned out to be your bestie and an
actual effective bodyguard, using you to produce weapons was all I had left for a time.”

Jaune blinked. “Wait. You actually did intend for Pyrrha to kill me?”

“Essentially. Though after the scene you two made at the ball before the attack, I suppose all the by –aha—little death—are off the table now. Either way, you made money and both money and arms helped fund my employer's interests.”

Thoughts were racing through Jaune's head now. “Hold on. Hold on. How do you have en employer? We're partners in the business. And what interests?!”

“Of course then Taurus got impatient and caught a case of the stupids when you previewed the Jericho without giving me a chance to let my alternative revenue streams hear about it.” She laughed again, just that much more sinister. “But then I saw how the world reacted. Despite how much work I put in convincing people you were a reclusive sex maniac with bizarre appetites, everyone was genuinely thrown for a loop to hear you were missing at the hands of terrorists.

“That's when I realized that my end game was already set up.”

“Cinder,” Jaune cut her off. “What the hell are you talking about? I'm still turning all this over in my head, but I know you just admitted to... all the crime. Just all of it. You've got to know I'm going to convene the board over this. It's over Cinder. You're out.”

His bravado was killed in its tracks when Cinder responded with another dark cackle. “Oh you idiotic genius. You honestly have no idea. This is so wonderful! The board convened today, Jaune. They're old, conservative money—they aren't happy with your pro-faunus bent or your ratcheting down the arms shipments. That, and the SDC head has been putting pressure on their other interests. The announcement goes out on Monday: I'm being named the CEO of Arc Industries. You're the one being locked out.”

“What? You can't do that. I've got rights. I can called a stockholder's meeting and—”

“You'll have to do that before Monday, and somehow I don't think you will,” Cinder mocked. “See, I took out a bit of insurance to keep you away from Vale. Specifically, I think it'd be a very good idea for you to reserve some tickets to Vacuo. Extra luggage space for your suit, maybe?”

Jaune's eyes went wide with panic. “How did...”

“I saw images from Sienna Crossroads and the Emerald Forest battles. You think I wouldn't have recognized the Arc Rector jammed in your girlfriend's chest as the same one in the female powered armor?” While Jaune was silenced by dent of being utterly agog, Cinder went in for the kill.

“So yea, like I said, get your ass to Vacuo unless you want a lot of innocent people to die. Oh, but since you're at the old family homestead, you might want to ask dear old dad about your ancestor. Maybe, just maybe he'll have some tips on how to put the Star Dragon back to sleep.”

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“Taurus? Yeah. I'm moving up our timetable. Just in case, I'm going to sign over the trucks to our 'new hires' and send the forced software update as soon as I'm registered as CEO on the Arc Network Monday afternoon. Hmm? No, the board already revoked Arc's access. I'm acting CEO already. There is nothing standing in our way. And just in case...”

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Far beneath mountains of Vacuo, dozens of shaped charges went off, activated from half a world away by Cinder. Weighty stalactites tumbled from the ceiling of the massive cavern, crashing through an already sundered hole in a colossal egg-shaped ship. They fell into that metal womb to crash against a green, scaly hide.

Slow, rhythmic breath was interrupted by an annoyed snort, then an irate growl as one yellow eye cracked open. Even in the dark, and dragging himself from a thousand years of sleep, the formerly sleeping giant spotted that there were things missing. Treasures. And something worth far more.

Rage dragged him the rest of the way out of his torpor.

Someone would pay. Someone would suffer.

No one stole from Fin Fang Foom and lived!

Chapter End Notes

Fin. Fang. Foom!

I am so excited to have gotten here. Fin Fang Foom is one of my favorite Kirby Creations. In fact, over in The Descendants, my original fiction series, I did a full-issue homage to Jack 'The King' Kirby and a dime store version of Triple F here was the first villain the heroes fought (Lisa also gained a spell that lets her fire Kirby Dots at people). This was always the plan, as far back as a year ago when I started: having Team JNPR and Team RWBY taking on Fin Fang Foom. Partially why I wrote this.

Lots of foreshadowing and in-jokes here. Yes, Ruby and Matte are messing around with a new version of Port's weapon. Port is my absolute favorite side character. More than Team CVFY, more than any other teacher, Team STRQ, more even than Penny and I really like Penny. He is a bombastic Gentleman Adventurer and I love him. Also I'm building up to something with this. Wait for it. Hint: you can't have a Marvel Movie without it and it's not a blue beam in the sky.

Peep jousting is a real thing. Just take two marshmallow peeps, stick a toothpick in the front of each, sit them facing each other in a microwave... then watch as your microwave is ruined.

Also planned from the start was the Gris/Pyrrha fight. Durendal was fun to design, since I knew I wanted the gun scabbard and also to give Gris Daredevil's billy club. Then end was also a given. Since in this AU Pyrrha didn't get to pin Jaune to the tree, she just had to pin an Arc to something.

And the shield. Okay, so since I had the reflect thing happen in the Juggernaut fight, everyone has been saying Jaune's shield was like Avalon from Fate Stay Night. Well I hadn't seen Fate Stay Night at the time. I was going more for King Arthur's nameless scabbard, which made it so he couldn't bleed out while he wore it. In most Arthurian traditions, Arthur finally dies because his scabbard is taken from him before the fight with Mordred. The backlash thing was just because, well, retribution is one of my favorite super powers.

Speaking of, the Aegis is the shield of Athena, goddess of wisdom and tactics. She's
the war god your puny Ares wishes he could smell like. Considering Jaune's the tactician of the series, it seemed appropros.

Speaking of speaking of, the whole male Arc Semblance thing. I don't like the idea of Jaune having a Semblance. While Aura is already a superpower, everyone in the series has it, so it really doesn't count. I prefer Jaune being the Sokka of the group, living by his skill an wits rather than a superpower.

A couple of kinda dumb references. Gris blurts out 'Golden Chance', which is a line from Bleach said by the crazy exorcist TV show guy. It just caught my ear in the sub because he says it in amazingly accented English. Cinder mentions 'alternative revenue streams', which was a catchphrase in the early seasons of Leverage. She also tells Jaune to get his ass to Vacuo, not Mars.

Which brings us back into the original Iron Man movie. The whole point of making Cinder the Obadiah was to give her the chance to deliver the the lock-out speech with her usual... absolutely no subtlety. What was Salem thinking sending her in to infiltrate anything? She wasn't able to walk down the hall in a non-sinister way. Not saying she wasn't fun doing it but seriously. She's as much a covert agent as James Bond is. And James Bond is usually captured and destroys half a city every movie.

I'd like to step away from the fun stuff a moment and get serious for a bit. Skip down to the 'New Chapter' line if you don't care.

Last time, I mentioned how I lost my mother. While I'm still struggling to get a job and scratch together the money to pay the rent (Amazon helpfully stepped up by allowing thieves to more easily sell my book and make sure I get nothing in the meantime), I got an amazing outpouring in my PM from readers of my fics here.

I cannot say how much what you guys said have meant to me. They reaffirmed to me my reason for writing. Like any good bard (soulful or otherwise), I want to make people better even if it's just in the form of making their day just a little better or give them a bit of inspiration through my writing. I was questioning whether to continue what I was doing until I heard from this community and my own over on descendantsserial DOT com and I realize that what I do does have meaning and I should continue not only for myself, but for the people that enjoy my work.

So yeah, I'm back in action, not just with fan fiction, which is my way of coping, and with my original creations.

Thank you all so much. If I haven't replied to your PMs, it's because I don't have internet at my place and have to upload at the library or a friend's house. I will reply personally to all of you in time.

Next Chapter, the Star Dragon awakens! An mysterious assailant attacks the Arc compound. The penultimate arc of this fic has begun!
Eight Years Ago...

Jaune rested his elbows on his drafting table and heaved a frustrated sigh. He'd just gotten back to his work space after an hour-long meeting with his supervisor in which he'd been dressed down for doing his job too well.

This after an initial complaint that his training drones Beacon had ordered had been all-to handily annihilated by the first year students. No, correction a first year student. Jaune had no intention of ever finding out what kind of person was demolishing military-grad drones at his age.

In any event, Ozpin hoped that purchasing the drones, he could give Beacon an edge on training for the Vytal Festival and had asked for more robust and challenging drones. Was it really Jaune's fault that he'd delivered? Or that one of the drones had carved a four foot wide trench through the wall of Beacon's south training ground? Also that another had put an entire team (CRDL, was it?) in the infirmary? Did he want a challenge or not?

Sure he was sorry for the injuries he'd caused, but one of Ozpin's requests was specifically to tighten up the sensitivity on the safety inhibitors so the drones could threaten injury even against Aura-wielders.

Now he was getting a reprimand and it was looking less and less like his supervisor was going to look at his proposal for his own prototypes: anti-Grimm weaponry, Dust-less power sources, things like that. His past performance didn't seem too count for much.

Less than two months on the manufacturing line at the City of Vale branch of Advanced Idea Mechanics, Jaune had gotten the attention of the higher-ups when he started adjusting the machines for better efficiency. It turned out he had a knack with technology that only grew as he got on-the-job training. They'd been more than happy to listen to his ideas then.

But after this disaster and what was only known as the 'Lightning Dust Incident', his star was no longer on the rise. He kept sending concept proposals and they kept being ignored.

Not for the first time, he pondered just giving up and going home. He was just bringing even more shame to the family than his father had at this point. He'd come to Vale with the hope of becoming a Hunter and now he was the screw-up technician who was putting prospective Hunters in the hospital. Just as well he go crawling back to Golden Fields and never be heard from again.

"Jaune Arc, I presume?"

He hadn't heard the door open and, with a startled yelp, he sat up straight. "Um, yes?"

Standing in the door frame was a woman possessed of what he could only call dangerous beauty. Luscious ebon hair that partially hid he face, fierce eyes of a jungle cat, and a a body that managed to make even the conservative black business suit and skirt look almost lewd. She sauntered toward him, carrying a scroll which she turned in his direction.

On the screen was a schematic he'd drawn up weeks ago: a rough design for an anti-Grimm high velocity mortar. "The Jaune Arc that designed this?"
He wondered what she was here to complain about. “S-sure. I mean yeah, that's me.”

“This,” she said, reaching the draft table and leaning seductively forward, “Is a million lien idea.”

“Thank you?” his hopes started to rise. “A-are you from another branch? I've sent in a lot of different proposals and—”

She cut him off. “I do business with AIM from time to time and also from time to time, they direct me toward people who might interest me.” Sliding the scroll closed, she stored it in an inner pocket of her suit jacket. When her hand returned, it was holding a business card. “Cinder Fall. I'm a venture capitalist. And I think you could make me a lot of money.”

Now...

Jaune stared at his scroll, dumbfounded.

He'd never been under the impression that Cinder was a good person. She was greedy, insulting, aggressive in all the wrong ways, and tried to intimidate her way through life when just basic human decency would probably do better.

And from time to time, she'd even threatened to convince the board to drum him out of the company when he wasn't producing quickly enough or chose to shelf something she was interested in like attempts to miniaturize the original barn-sized arc reactor.

Still, he never expected this.

Working with the White Fang? And what was in Vacuo and how did it relate to the old story of the Star...

His eyes widened in terror as he recalled what Ozpin said during the SHIELD meeting:

'We've found that many—if not most—modern myths and fairy tales contain some level of truth.’

'They are folk memories, or sometimes garbled warnings from the past.'

'The problem with the legends is that many of the creatures involved are long-lived, the objects indestructible and the events cyclical.’

'What has come before may come again.'

His eyes widening, he got up and ran out of the room.

He found everyone in the dining room, but even though there were serving platters and tureens on the table, no one was eating. Instead they were gathered around scrolls: Matte, Ruby and Blanche watching Ruby's, Pyrrha, Gris and Rey watching Pyrrha's, Claire watching with Yang, and finally his parents standing behind Verte and her new model.

Everyone was silent save for a few concerned murmurs, eyes fixed on the screens.

“Sorry I'm...” he paused as he surveyed the scene. “What's going on?”

Verte looked up at him, wild-eyed. “I was showing everyone the scroll you gave me when it
picked up the alert. There was a super-strong earthquake in Vacuo. A bunch of villages got hit... Atlas is deploying troops even!

Jaune set his jaw. “That's no earthquake.”

It was Matte who voiced what came to mind for everyone. “What're you talking about, Jaune?”

He swallowed. “This is going to take a longer explanation than those people in Vacuo have time for. Where's the epicenter of the quake?”

After a second of checking, Pyrrha spoke up, switching on the projector mode on her scroll to put up a map of Vacuo hovering above the table with a red dot radiating concentric circles indicating the epicenter. “It's right here—the same mountain where we performed the Jericho demonstration... right before we were taken by the White Fang.”

“Oh, that bitch.” Jaune blurted out.

“Jaune!” his mother said, scandalized.

“Sorry. It's just...” He massaged his temples, pacing back and forth along the length of the table. “It's just that this was all a set up. Everything that's happened from that day on.” He looked to Pyrrha. “Remember? Cinder told us we had to move the demonstration to that mountain because of some SDC Dust survey at the other location. I never even asked to see the survey because what did it matter? Except it did matter. A lot. The Jericho destroyed every Grimm on that mountain, scorched the earth of every natural obstacle and made it cake for her to find it.”

Pyrrha handed her scroll off to Gris and got up to stop Jaune by catching him about the shoulders. “Jaune, you're not making sense. Who are you talking about? What did they find?”

He leaned into her hold for support and squeezed his eyes shut. “Cinder. She's up to something. Something bigger than just taking the company.”

“Cinder's trying to take the company?”

“Already has apparently, unless I manage to call an emergency stockholder's meeting. And to keep me from doing that, she's doing this.” He gestured to the map still on display.

Ruby cocked her head in curiosity. “Cinder's causing the earthquake?”

After taking a second to pull himself together, Jaune tried again. “I just called Cinder about keeping my family from getting in touch with me. That's when she went into this big villain monologue and told me about taking the company and how she knew about...” He paused, realized it wasn't important to hide it anymore, and continued, “the suits. So to stop me from stopping her, she told me something was going down in Vacuo—then she told me to ask Dad about the Star Dragon.”

He turned Pyrrha's hold into a sideways hug as he arranged them both to face the others and the map. Everyone had gone still in confusion and concern. “Most of the myths and legends we know are based on something. Some of them are just plain real. The knight—my ancestor—put the Star Dragon to sleep. Cinder used us and the Jericho test to uncover its resting place—and now she's woken it up.”

“Hold on,” Yang said, scowling from having to wrap her mind around what was being said. “You're talking about A dragon dragon. Big flaming lizard? That's what we're talking about here?”
“Unfortunately,” Leon said, his deep voice cutting over the mutterings of dread coming from the others, “It's worse than that. The dragons of long ago were little more than mere animals. Most of the stories describe the Star Dragon as like one of those but more powerful, but the story our family's passed down depict a dragon that walks and thinks like a man, and who wields ten great powers from its hand and spits fire that dissolves whatever it touches like acid.”

Jaune nodded absently. “I remember that. And the Star Knight defeated it by ‘turning its greatest power back upon it, causing it to retreat and sink into a deep slumber.”

Leon picked up where he left off. “We simplified the story for the kids, but there are a few details we left out from the accounts that eventually got written down. For example, the dragon retreated to a chamber in the mountains of Vacuo. No one wanted to risk waking it, so they sealed it up with Earth Dust tempered to be so strong no force on Remnant could muster.”

“Until some genius went and invented the Jericho missile,” Jaune pointed out with a groan, “And let Cinder point on right where she wanted it.”

“This isn't your fault, Jaune. Never forget that. Any invention can be used for evil. This is that woman, Cinder's fault and no one else's.”

After taking a moment to school his expression, Jaune rolled his wrist, not acknowledging whether or not he believed what his father was saying. “Is there anything else that can help us? I can guess that turning the dragon's power back on it means using the Aegis, but what's it's greatest power? The acid fireball?”

Leon frowned just a moment as he thought. “Not likely, part of that record was lost, but we know the dragon's final attack came from its right hand. The powers it did have?” He took another minute to recall. “The power to create ice, fire, and lightning; to conjure winds, generate forces that can throw a man a dozen feet, the manipulate minds and create darkness, the disintegrate or alter the shape of objects, and to command gravity. Any one of those alone would be a great power.”

“Yeah, that sounds like if Weiss could level up like in a video game,” said Ruby, a little too delighted in hearing about new methods of mayhem.

“Well obviously it's not the darkness thing. No one is going to call turning out the lights a 'greatest power',” Gris pointed out. “And I'll admit, wind control is great, but I'm awesome because I'm skilled, not because of the wind. Same goes for fire, ice and lightning—that's standard Hunter stuff that anyone with access to Dust can do.”

Rey nodded. “Yeah, none of that holds a candle to say, gravity manipulation. At that point we're talking one of the four fundamental forces.”

“Still within the reach of some Semblances,” said Ruby. “I mean there's Pyrrha and me.”

“Speed's not a fundamental force,” Rey blurted out, then looked embarrassed.

Ruby blinked. “Really?”

The fox faunus nodded meekly and counted on his fingers. “Gravitation, electromagnetism, the strong interaction and the weak interaction. I mean, maybe you could say your power involves inertia, but that's a physical law, not a fundamental force.”

Gris grinned and nudged her partner with her shoulder. “Look at you and your big brain. So... what's left? Telekinesis is pretty middle of the road. So... disintegration or mind control. Both of those mean game over if they hit you.”
“But the Aegis wouldn't block mind control...” Jaune reasoned. “And it only works if the power would destroy the wielder. Sounds like disintegration's the winner. You know, if 'things that will kill me' had a prize for the best.”

Yang raised her hand. “Um... am I the only one who feels like we turned over two pages at once here? What the hell's an Ageist?” Ruby, Pyrrha, and Rey all seemed confused, as did Verte. Jaune locked eyes with his father and both men nodded.

“Okay, everyone,” Jaune said. “Cards on the table. This isn't the time to try and keep secrets for no good reason, so I'm going to explain this. Everything.”

And he did; from his birthright of the Aegis and a brief history of the shield, to the circumstances of his and Pyrrha's imprisonment and escape, to the powered armor and the SHIELD team, finishing up with his conversation with Cinder. Muriel and Claire went ahead and served dinner as he explained and answered questions.

By the time he was done, everyone was enjoying a dessert of chocolate cake while also trying to digest the big picture.

It was Yang who decided to try and sum up. “So... we're on our way to Vacuo then? To fight a dragon who has like... ten super powers on top of the usual fire breath.”

Jaune started to reply but paused as something struck him. “Ten powers... on it's hands.” Slowly, he held up both hands and started counting as he folded each finger and thumb down one by one. “One... two... three...”

“Did he just crack under the pressure?” Matte asked.

Jaune ignored her, turning to Pyrrha. “When's the last time you've ever seen Cinder wear jewelry?”

The question caught her off guard, making her stumble through her answer. “I... don't recall. She doesn't normally wear it.”

“She never wears jewelry. Not even the pins they give to you at charity fundraisers. I have never seen her wear anything on her neck, ears or hands... except when I had the press conference after our kidnapping. I only remember because she grabbed me by the collar and it hurt... because she was wearing ten rings.”

His mind was racing now as he brought it all together. “Ten rings on Cinder's hand and Cinder woke the Star Dragon, who had ten powers that came from its hands. And remember Cardin? How Ozpin said his powers came from a gem they were looking for? What do you want to bet that came from Cinder too?”

Ruby stroked her chin. “So... Cinder has the Star Dragon's powers. That's a good thing, right? That means it's less dangerous... in the way a giant monster with acid fire spit is less dangerous.”

Jaune shook his head. “Except for two things, Rubes: One, now we have two insanely powerful beings running around out there instead of one. And two, the only way the Star Knight finally beat this thing was getting hit by the disintegrator and having the Aegis rebound it. If the dragon doesn't have that ring... How are we going to take it down?”

Everyone at the table was silent until Pyrrha visibly perked up with an idea. “Last time the Star Knight had the disintegration power to use against the dragon, it's true. But we have something he didn't have,” she pulled out her scroll.
“What's that? Did you design a new super-weapon?” Ruby asked, practically vibrating. “Can I use it? I've killed all sorts of Grimm before, but never a dragon!”

Pyrrha smiled at her enthusiasm, but shook her head. “Not a weapon perse. Something better: a goddess.”

The squeal Ruby released hurt everyone's ears. “Ooo, Nora! I've been waiting so see her cut loose.”

Yang just folded her arms grumpily. “You know, I'm a big gun too.” She flexed, “Two big guns in fact! I've got dibs on first punch!”

“I don't think anyone's going to argue with you one that,” said Pyrrha, excusing herself from the table. “In the meantime, I'll call the others and have them meet us in Vacuo.”

After Pyrrha left the room, Verte spoke up. “Um... Jaune? It's a day's flight to Vacuo isn't it? And still a long flight from Vacuo to Vale? If you go to stop this dragon, what about your company? You won't be able to get back in time to stop Cinder from taking it from you.”

He sat back in his seat and stared up at the ceiling, blowing out a tired sigh. “Honestly? It doesn't matter. Thousands of people are going to die if we don't stop the Star Dragon. If sacrificing control of my company is the cost, I'm willing to pay that.”

“Um, there's a problem with that,” Ruby piped up, “Aren't you forgetting how this whole mess started? Cinder selling your weapons to guys like Adam and using them to blow open Star Dragon holes? If she's got control of all of Arc Industries how much more damage is she going to do?”

“That's a very good point,” Blanche said. “If we're assuming the Juggernaut was also sent by Cinder and that Cinder's rings are the source of the dragon's powers, then she's the truly dangerous one here—and we don't even know what she plans to do with everything she's gathered? It can't be money; you already said she makes as much money off Arc Industries as you.”

Muriel nodded in agreement. “And you can't just give up. You're extraordinarily bright and you have a whole table full of bright people here to help. Surely we can come up with some way to save your company.”

“Like you going to Vale and stopping her while I take the Aegis to Vacuo and fight the dragon,” Gris chipped in. When some of the others gave her looks, she folded her arms. “Look, this isn't trying to grandstand, alright? I know the story too, and the only reason male-line Arcs usually get the shield is because their Semblance is its power source. Any Arc can use the Aegis, even if just by marriage like great-great-great grandma Athena. Difference is, us ladies can still have a Semblance to fight with. And with Dad needing his cane and Mom retired, I'm the only one in the family with Hunter training. I'm not saying I'm the best choice, but I'm the only one.”

“No.” Jaune said firmly. “Gris, you might be a great student Huntress, but one: you aren't fully trained yet. And two, you don't have a forty-three million lien suit of powered armor to help you. This isn't a pack of Beowolves or a couple of Urasae—this is a monster of legend that couldn't be killed back in the day. Remember: we just discussed how the Aegis might not even be able to stop it this time. We'll need more options and more powerful weapons; and like it or not, I still bring that to the table thanks to the Starbrand armor.”

He paused, “Speaking of which, Dad, is there any chance you know where the original Star Brand is?”

Leon shook his head, spreading his hands helplessly. “It's been gone for centuries. The Starbrand
was the original sword component of Crocea Mors.”

“You don't seem all that bothered by the loss of a weapon that let its owner do anything,” said Yang.

“That part became exaggerated over the years.”

“So what did it really do?” asked Ruby.

Leon shrugged. “It was a sword that was also a bow. In those days, shooting and stabbing really was ‘everything’ in those days when it came to combat. Not exactly that impressive these days. Er, no offense.”

“None taken,” Rey replied, fondly patting the sword at his hip. “Galvayra here is one of the classics. Everyone loves classics.”

Jaune nodded. “Right, so this time the Star Knight is going to have a serious upgrade to his weapon at least.” He steepled his fingers in front of him, thumbs touched to his lips. “So yeah, I have to go. But Blanche is right: Cinder isn't after Arc Industries for the money. If she wanted me to lose, she wouldn't have told me it was the Star Dragon, and would have left it with its rings. This is all a diversion to keep me away from the company.”

“Then what are you going to do?” asked, Verte, her eyes shining with the old hero worship he remembered her turning his direction.

He ground his teeth. “The best I can.”

Out in the hall, Pyrrha hung up with Blake. Apparently Weiss hadn't been able to resist the allure of studying the new Dust type she's acquired from the Wakandan mound via Rey and had showed up almost immediately after they'd left for Golden Fields.

It was both a blessing and a curse to Pyrrha's mind. On the one hand, Blake had managed to push a lot of non-verbal guilt on her for keeping Weiss's involvement from Jaune. She justified it as not wanting to get his expectations up; after all she was not a Dust expert and all her assumptions were based on knowledge she could pull off the CCT.

In truth, she was embarrassed to show him her third design for the Star Brand modules. Not after she'd made light of his tendency to over build.

But on the bright side, Weiss had volunteered both herself and her private plane to the cause of fighting the Star Dragon. And immediately after she'd said that, she'd sent the results of her Dust analysis.

Checking the message on her scroll, Pyrrha couldn't help but let a small grin twist her lips. The specs were way more impressive than she'd hoped. Alloyed with titanium steel, vibranium created a metal Weiss called adamant steel or 'adamantium', which was lighter and stronger than anything on Remnant. But that was overshadowed by the main result: powdered vibranium Dust was psychoreactive to intense emotion, producing a kinetic redirection effect similar to the Juggernaut's. It was perfect for her purposes.

With a few quick taps, she called up her project folder on the Arc compound's network and started the fabrication for Project Titan.
Kind of a slow chapter, setting up and getting all the players on the board. However, I did try to have fun with it.

I mentioned before that Jaune's first job was with AIM, one of Marvel's ubiquitous evil organizations, usually led by MODOK, who is a giant head with tiny hands and feet riding a hover chair. Because comics.

We got to see the drones Jaune built for Ozpin before, but now we see that they were actually ordered because a lonely and frustrated Pyrrha destroyed the previous ones. I just thought it would be fun to connect the dots a bit more; these events led to the AU we're in now: Jaune didn't attend Beacon, which left Pyrrha partnered with Ren, which led to her trashing the drones, Jaune built new badass drones, which got Cinder's attention and gave her a better idea on how to carry out Salem's ambitions.

A lot of people questioned why Jaune has to be the one to use the Aegis, so I hope this chapter answers that. His father couldn't possibly do it because he can't walk. Also I tried to explain better about the male line Arc thing. Only the son of a son would be born as a 'power source' for the Aegis. Why not tie it to the whole line? So the daughters can still have Semblances and help protect the family line.

I've cut a chapter that I built up in the previews: Weiss assaulting the Arc Compound in Black Cat/Panther form. In the end, it just wasn't working and I'd rather have her fighting with the team than against them.

An anime reference in this chapter: Rey's weapon, Galvayra, is named after the Bow of Light from the series Slayers.

And last but not least, I've have the 'sword that's also a bow' joke in my back pocket for a while. Everything in modern Remnant is also a gun, so at some point there had to be a brand new tech that was also a bow. Yes, it's stupid. Sue me :p.

Oh yes and how can I forget: Project Titan, the third Star Brand module. I think we all know what's coming. There was so much speculation, so much guessing that it was going to be Yang, but you all knew I couldn't finish out this fic without bringing this character over into the AU. It wouldn't be a Marvel fic without them. And when I show this off, it's going to be...

Incredible.

Next Chapter, both full teams finally clash against the might if Fin Fang Foom!
It was raining while the sun was shining as Weiss's car, now bearing the other half of the SHIELD team arrived at the SDC corporate hangar.

Weiss had heard the phenomenon called the Gods' Tears and thought it was perhaps an overly dramatic name, but fitting considering both the news Blake had relayed from Pyrrha as well as her own mood.

There was going to be no obfuscating or justifying this time. She was throwing in with those her father considered 'the enemy'. Being disowned was the least of her worries. Jacques Wilhelm Schnee was not a man to take either betrayal or proprietary technology lightly. And here she was committing the former while no doubt to his mind being the later.

A prototype. That's all his middle child and youngest daughter was. It didn't matter what agony or mental strain it put on her; what mattered was that her father had a new weapon to sell to...

Who?

She paused as the others piled out of the hired car. There was no way General Ironwood would pay for something so ethically horrendous. Despite being single-minded at times, the General was a good man. Perhaps some might think otherwise, but thanks to Ruby's big mouth, Weiss knew what he'd really done for Penny Polendina.

None of the other Generals of Atlas would make a move without consulting with Ironwood either. And Weiss doubted any of the other Kingdoms had the military budget to fund what her father was doing. So who?

“Weiss?”

She suppressed a start. “Hmm?” was the best she could manage as she climbed out of the car.

Blake had come around to her side and was giving her that 'I'm not going to ask, but I'm going to keep looking at you like this until you spill' look. “I was saying 'thank you' for loaning us your plane.”

“How could I not knowing what's at stake? And I did help with that Juggernaut business, didn't I?” She made a show of dusting herself off and straightening her clothes. Before Blake could question her, she struck first. “Now let's move: It's a long way to Vacuo and we don't have time to loose.”

She made her way toward the only plane positioned to leave the hangar; a sleek airship she'd recently bought from the Divine Warrior Corporation out of Mistral. She'd upgraded from her old private dust plane after her father bought Divine Warrior earlier that year.

Ren and Nora were already standing near it, the Goddess of Thunder jabbering on excitedly.

“I wonder what kind of dragon it'll be! One of the long, twisty ones, or a drake with big wings? Oh, or maybe we'll get lucky and this Start Dragon of yours is actually Jormungandr. I've been saying for a long time that someone needs to give him a good thrashing for chewing on Yggdrasil the World Tree.” She brandished Magnahild as if already in battle with the monster.
“To be honest, I'm hoping all the legends are being blown way out of proportion,” said Ren.

Nora shouldered Magnahild and pouted. “Aww, you're no fun. What's even the point of weak opponents? They're boring and break so easy! No, we need something big and awesome we can fight for days. How else can we give the skalds enough material to write a good epic?”

Even though the tiny smile on his face was never far, Ren let out a sigh for effect anyway. “Nora? There aren't any skalds here.”

She blinked. “Then how do you let others know of your heroic exploits and the ruin of your enemies?”

“The news mostly. But me personally I'm a black ops agent... was a black ops agent, I suppose. That means our exploits are meant to be secret.”

Absolute horror crossed Nora's face. “You mean you've been doing great deeds without anyone knowing? No epics?” Ren shook his head. “No poems?” Another shake of his head. “Not even a dirty limerick?” This last confirmation brought tears to her eyes and she launched herself at him, dropping Magnahild in order to capture him in a firm embrace.

“Oh my goodness Renny, I'm so sorry I left you in this terrible place! When this is over, maybe I can convince Father to take me back and then I'll bring you back to Asgard where I'll have the best skalds ever record everything you've ever done! And if I can't go back, we'll hire that Lisa Lavender person from your box of sights and voices. She reports on far less important things, such as when that ground hog saw its shadow.”

She chuckled. “As if ground hogs can predict the coming of the seasons. Silly ground hog.”

Behind her, the hatch of the plane opened and swung down, the stairs starting to unfold. Taken by surprise, Nora whirled and held out her hands, summoning Magnahild to her and instantly wreathing it in lightning. A very short man with white hair and wide eyes was caught staring down the wrong end of the Thunderer. “Who are you and what are you doing in the Lady Schnee's flying conveyance?!”

The terrified man raised his hands and started stammering. “I... my name is Klein. I'm Miss Schnee's manservant.”

“What are you doing?!” Weiss demanded, dashing over to interpose herself between Klein and Weiss. “You can't just point weapons at random people, what's wrong with you?!”

Nora sheepishly tried to hide the crackling hammer behind her back and waved at Klein. “I was...” She looked pleadingly to Ren. “Ren?”

He shrugged. “If he really was someone who didn't belong on your plane, you'd be thankful right now... provided she didn't blast the plane and the intruder both.”

“Well he's not an intruder, so put the magical god weapon away now, please.” Weiss almost gagged having said those words. The rational part of her was resisting the 'magical god hammer' part. The Schnee in her wasn't doing much better with 'please'.

Swallowing down her revulsion, she turned to Klein. “I know I promised you the night off, Klein, but something of an emergency came up, as I said on the scroll. These are Lie Ren, Nora Valkyrie and Blake Belladonna and we desperately need to get to Vacuo with all haste. Once this is done, I'll give you an entire week's vacation.”
The older man chuckled, holding up a hand. “There's no need, I assure you. I'm happy to assist you in any way I can, Miss Schnee.”

“Thank you so much,” the soon to be former heiress said with genuine gratefulness. “Did you bring what I asked you to?”

He nodded. “The item is on your seat in the main cabin. Will you be requiring anything else?”

“No, thank you. We need to be under way as soon as possible.”

“Understood.”

Not much later, the airship was in the sky, making its way toward Vacuo with half of Team RWBY, an on-loan SHIELD agent and the Goddess of Thunder sitting in the posh lounge-like passenger cabin.

“Schnee Breweries.” Nora read from the side of the imported beer bottle in her hand. Her eyes flicked from the beer to Weiss, the beer to Weiss, she lifted the bottle a little in the heiress's direction. The beer to Weiss, the beer to Weiss...

“Yes! My family owns the brewery, alright?!” Weiss finally snapped. “We own literally sixty percent of the industry in Atlas! That's what you were asking, right?”

Nora blinked at the little outburst. “I was wondering why you weren't drinking, actually. Your television ads have shown me that Remnant also has the tradition of allies drinking together. So we must drink!” She popped the top off with her thumb, pounded back the beer in three gulps and tossed the bottle behind her. It clanked cringingly against the window there and she picked up another from the collection she'd assembled from the cabin's mini fridge. “Copiously!”

Weiss fidgeted with her hands in her lap. “I'm not really in the drinking mood right now. And in any event, I drink wine, not beer.”

“Then why is your refrigerator filled with them?” asked Ren, who was holding a bottle and pretending to drink for Nora's sake.

“They're standard issue on all SDC company planes. Father... Wilhelm finds it useful to get anyone he has dealings with at least a little buzzed before negotiations.”

Blake was genuinely drinking, having spent the last few years seeing Remnant's stranger, more horrifying side and learning the value of a drink or two before heading into one of those situations. “I'm... not surprised at all.” After a beat, she came to a decision and followed up with, “But there is something bothering you, isn't it?”

Weiss pursed her lips. “I suppose I can't keep this hidden. Holding back in this fight sounds like a terrible idea, after all.” Slowly, she stood from her seat and moved so she could face the other three all at once. “I've known my father was not a good man. He hasn't treated his children any better than he treats his business rivals and associates. However, I've long felt a twisted sort of loyalty to my family; that if I didn't do what was required of me, it would be a betrayal of my sister and mother...” after a short pause she added tentatively, “and my brother.”

After a deep breath, she continued. “However, even that has been eroded over the years. I'm just sorry it took this long for me to reach my braking point—it's destroyed some of the most important relationships in my life and made me increasingly miserable. Like a complete fool, I accepted that
as just a fact of life. But recently, things have changed. I've learned that my father is involved with truly monstrous experiments involving capturing the essence of Grimm... and implanting that essence in people.”

The horror in the room was palpable. Nora, in the middle of her fifth beer, choked and sputtered out a cloud of the stuff. “What?! That's madness!”

Even seemingly implacable Ren was agog. “What can he possibly expect to achieve with that plan? Putting anything from a Grimm into a human... I can't even imagine what the result would be.”

Weiss's shoulders hunched. “I know what the result would be...” Another deep breath and she let the change come over her. It was less willing it and more giving up the fight; the constant struggle that had become a fixture in the back of her mind. The thing inside her was unleashed.

Bones and cartilage popped, forcing her spine straight and lengthening it. Muscles hypertrophies, bulging beneath darkening skin. A black miasma like the fumes of a dead Grimm exuded from her pores, staining her hair and sclera of her eyes black. The irises of those same eyes glowed red and her incisors extended into prominent fangs.

As the transformation ended, she hunched forward, those hateful Grimm eyes darting around in the same manner as a feral animal's. It took a moment for her to slow her breathing and compose herself. It took the others significantly longer to get over the shock.

Blake dropped the bottle in her hand, leaping up to go to her old friend's side only for the transformed woman to shy away.

“Keep your distance,” Weiss's voice was huskier and more rough than before. Seeing the look of hurt in the other's eyes, she added, “It's for your safety.”

Stopping short, Blake looked on with mixed curiosity and concern. “What did he do to you?”

“Grimm are the antithesis of life,” Weiss said shakily. “We are physical beings infused with Aura. Grimm are being essentially made of their version of Aura forced into a physical form. What my father did... he infused my Aura with the anti-Aura of a Bagheera—essentially adding its soul to mine. When I... allow it... I gain the strength, dexterity, durability... and the instincts of a Grimm. All the instincts. Your fear, your disgust—I feel it and it makes me just want to rip you apart.”

The last part was a growl that made Blake's ears lie back flat against her skull, but she steeled herself against flinching.

Behind her, Nora sighed and she heard the sound of a heavy weight scrapping the ground. The petite redhead sauntered up beside he, Magnahild resting on her shoulder. “Corrupted by the dark einherjaren? Oh Weiss, I was hoping we'd get to be friends. There would have drinking and fighting side by side and also painting each other's nails and doing each others hair.” Again she sighed and unshipped her weapon from her shoulder. “OH well. Now we have to put you out of your misery.”

She took a step toward Weiss, raising the hammer only to have Blake catch her by the back of her blouse and drag her back. “Wait a minute. No one's 'putting Weiss out of her misery' here.”

“But she's filled with evil now,” Nora whined, giving only the bare minimum struggle.

“She's a Schnee, technically, she was always filled with evil.” Blake replied flatly. “But all that means is that she's used to fighting back against it and doing good anyway, isn't it, Weiss?” She met her friend's eyes unwaiveringly while still holding on to Nora.
The heiress, who had started to rankle at the casual jab at her family (of whom really only her father was evil... and maybe her brother), was softened as she realized just what Blake meant. She closed her hands into fists and nodded firmly. “Right. I can control it. I won't let it run free.”

Squeezing her eyes tightly shut, she found that place in her mind—the terrible thing that might have been the memory of the Bagheera that was destroyed to give her her powers or might have been just her way of explaining the new dark side her father had forced upon her. Whatever it was, it wasn't rage or fear. The closest she could describe was hunger; a mindless desire to extract and absorb the negativity of all others.

Taking her cue from Blake, she pushed back against years ago when she first came to Beacon with her teachings from home; all those prejudices, attitudes and preconceptions. With a firm hand, she drove it back into a corner of her mind and built a wall between it and her actions—and in this case her body.

Changing back was like deflating in so many senses of the word. Her muscles returned to normal and her bones popped again as they realigned. The dark energies receded from her eyes and hair while her teeth slid back into their normal shape.

It left her feeling so drained that she didn't even notice she was falling until Blake and surprisingly Nora caught her.

“Well look at that, she can control it!” Nora crowed. She slapped Weiss on the back so hard she felt like Magnahild was being employed on her anyway. “I thought you were just a whiny little waif and it turns out you're a warrior after all! Now we have to drink!”

Before Weiss could reply, an open bottle was forced between her lips. Sputtering and forced to swallow the brew to keep from drowning, she finally found the strength to push her would be helpers away. “What is wrong with you?!” She demanded between coughs.

“I wouldn't have had to if you would just drink on your own.” Nora insisted with a sniff before downing the beer she'd been forcing on Weiss.

“Now isn't really the time, Nora,” Blake said, interposing herself between the two women. “I promise we'll all drink once Weiss is feeling a little better, okay?”

Nora nodded. “Right. Now that I know she's not going to try and eat us while we're distracted, I'm looking forward to seeing how you fight.”

Now that her airways were clear of beer, Weiss managed to pull herself together. “You know so much about Grimm, just imagine a Bagheera with full Hunter training and access to the purest Dust on the planet. I'm fairly sure it'll be up to your expectations.”

“Excellent! I'm so glad I don't have to pummel you into a fine paste!” Nora said cheerily.

“Er...” there wasn't much Weiss could say to that.

Luckily, Ren stepped in. “I think the others should hear about this so we're all on the same page about each other's combat capabilities. I'm already a little concerned on Jaune's insistence that we bring along the powered armors he set aside for us without any time to get accustomed to them, but now we're adding a whole new element.”

“Only the others.” Blake told him. “I know you first instinct is to report this all to SHIELD, and they certainly need to know about what the SDC is doing—”
“But they don't necessarily need to know about Miss Schnee. I understand that completely, Blake. I've tried to pursue my career by the book, but I doubt there's any SHIELD agent who is both a good person and who's forwarded everything they've come across in the line of duty.”

Blake nodded her agreement. “Thanks for being reasonable, Ren.”

“I wouldn't go as far as to say I'm being reasonable,” he admitted. “Even I can't be entirely sure I'm not partly doing this out of some petty little revenge for not telling me about Nora. I've known since my first year that the agency's hands aren't completely clean, but I never expected to be on the wrong end of it.”

“Trust me, you've been lucky.”

“As long as we're thanking people,” Weiss cut in, “Thank you, Blake. For reminding me of how far I've come and how much I backslid. Maybe if I hadn't driven you away back then, we wouldn't be here now.”

The cat faunus paused for a beat before surprising her friend with a tight hug. “You never have to thank your friends for standing by you, Weiss.” It only lasted a moment before she pulled back, showing a rare smile. “Besides, if we didn't end up here now, who would be saving the world?”

Chapter End Notes

I found I had to get this chapter in before this arc started. Mostly because once things start moving, there won't be time to tie up the Weiss/Blake relationship arc. They both have to complete their own character arcs and we don't have that much time before the end of this story.

Ren and Nora sadly will have to wait for the sequel to dive into their arcs because I ended up cutting so much for the sake of a smooth narrative. There was a flashback to when Nora left, a fight with the Remnant version of the Wrecking Crew, and initially the Star Dragon exposition was going to come from Heimdall when Nora tries to sneak Ren back to Asgard. They'll be a bigger part of Arc Reaction 2, I promise. You know how much I love these two.

A disproportionate number of people have expressed concern over Weiss being known as Black Cat or Black Panther while Blake... exists? I dunno, but they've been many and vehement, so Weiss's codename will be Bagheera when it comes to it. I already have precedent in this story with Pyrrha's being Hematite instead of Iron Woman or War Machine. So you don't have to worry.

Also to address surprisingly numerous queries: this fic started way before Volume 4 when we didn't know Jacques's name, that Whitely or Klein existed, or Tyrian ruined Salem by virtue of existing. I'm not going to go back and change his name, but enough people have 'gently' corrected me about that or the nature of Menagerie that I decided to just say that AR!Jacques goes by a middle name 'Wilhelm'. Happy?

And yes, I have seen Vol 4 by now if my complaining about Tyrian constantly didn't tip people off. My verdict?

Eh. I can't really hate it on its own merits because it's laboring under wounds already
inflicted upon the series by Vol 3's choice to break up literally all the interesting character interactions besides Nora and Ren and Blake and Sun (bonus 'points' for the fact that Blake pretty much ignores Sun's antics until he goes all Alan Alda on her at the end) and pretty much only adds Blake's Mom with everyone she interacts with to replace that and she's only in like three episodes. The show feels super empty without it, especially once it really hit me that Team RNJR barely interacts with itself in the volume. They talk, but it's literally all plot related. Vol 4 was so blah that I actually feel sorry enough for the series to give it a mulligan on this season and let it have it's 'one more chance' after Vol 3 with Vol 5. After binging the whole thing in one shot, I might give Vol 5 rave accolades just for having two characters just freaking play off one another.

Aaaanyway, next Chapter, the Remnant! Avengers assemble to fight the might of Fin Fang Foom, we finally meet AR! Ironwood, and one more surprise gets thrown into the mix just to make the fight more interesting.

To anyone following my original works, you might like to know that I'm starting work on Soul Battery 3: Legacy of the Hailene, the much awaited next installment of Rune Breaker's sequel series.
Night had fallen by the time the ship crossed into Vacuo airspace, and there were still several hours left to go before they reached the mountainside where Jaune had given his Jericho demonstration that faithful day. Unwilling to waste time idling on the plane, Jaune and Pyrrha were giving the Falcon subsystem for the Starbrand armor a shakedown flight.

The Falcon was a high-speed, high-maneuverability component consisting add-ons to his helmet, shoulders, back and chest to increase aerodynamics as well as a back-mounted assembly that resembled mechanical wings. There were mini-repulsers in the tips of the wings and a suite of high-output repulsers in the back capable of accelerating the suit to just beyond the speed of sound.

Which was the reason for the resounding boom that rumbled over the desert in the dead of night. Jaune quickly outpaced both the ship and Pyrrha, flying all the way out to the foothills of the distant mountains before using the superior maneuverability granted by micro-corrections from the wing-tip repulsers to perform a high-speed wingover.

Just for the sake of completeness, he sighted on a nearby jutting fist of stone and slowed to a hover, bringing the wings forward. Two dozen targeting reticules appeared on his HUD; one for each wing-tip repulser. Even if they only had a tenth of the output of a normal repulser, he'd never had so many weapons active in his screen at once. He couldn't help but let out a playfully maniacal laugh as he unleashed their payload in a computer-aided firing sequence that utterly pulverized the stone and the entire rock face around it in a satisfyingly quick time.

Then he folded the wings and fired the back-mounted repulsers, lifting off from the foothills and swiftly over-topping the nearby mountains until he could see the sun setting again in the far distance.

“I take it you like it then,” Pyrrha couldn't help but chuckle in reply to his energetic whooping.

“Well believe even more than the plasma sword?” He extended his arms and the wings folded in on themselves and reversed so that they emerged from beneath his arm pits with the joints facing forward and blossoming open to reveal plasma channels. Twin gouts of plasmatic fire streaked into the night to strafe a nearby mountain peak, sheering off part of it and sending it tumbling down the slopes. “I just made a turn at mach 1! I can't wait to add this capability to the next Hematite so you can see how awesome that feels for yourself!”

It was possible to hear the pride bubbling up in Pyrrha's chest as she replied with, “I look forward to it.”

They didn't get to say more as suddenly they were interrupted by Glynda. “Incoming call, Mr. Arc. The ability to reject or ignore has been disabled.”

Inside his helm, Jaune's eyes narrowed. “Answer then.” As soon as the other line picked up, he said, “Professor Ozpin,” allowing his suspicion brim over in his tone.

“Good evening, Mr. Arc. You don't sound pleased to hear from me.”

Jaune didn't bother with preamble. “Oh that? That'd be because when you first met me, you made it pretty clear that you wanted me to lead this team because I was the descendant of the Star Knight
and you have this thing about old stories coming true and repeating. Then something happened. What was it, Pyr? Oh wait, I remember: it turns out Cinder's been looting super-powered geeaws--FROM THE STAR DRAGON. Who she just woke up by the way. I really appreciate you taking me aside back then and telling me that was a thing too. Or is it different from the story? Is it really only an ancient super-genius Wyvern that's still probably going to kill us?"

He cringed at the idea even as he said it. Wyvern only existed in histories: vast, terrible dragon Grimm who served as living carriers, spawning other Grimm as they flew overhead. The few on record had been blamed on the negative emotions generated enmasse when full scale war broke out.

It shocked him that Humanity and Faunus still tried to wage war after the first time doing so conjured epic hell-monsters that created more hell-monsters. He wondered if the White Fang ever considered what would happen if they actually pulled off a major attack.

“No, Mr. Arc, it is an actual dragon from the stars,” said Ozpin. “And as to the lack of information given to you: it was for the greater good. While SHIELD was aware of the location of the dragon's chamber, we had no idea that anyone else was aware of its presence. I feared that telling you would encourage you to seek out the chamber—and possibly be followed to it. This was especially a concern due to your association with Cinder Fall.”

“You knew about Cinder too!? She's stealing my company out from under me as we speak—while wearing the dragon's ten rings!”

It sounded like Ozpin had started trying to explain himself before Jaune finished speaking. That cut off in a short choking sound and a long silence before, “...What did you say?”

Jaune growled a little under his breath. “I told you Cinder has the dragon's rings. She had them all the way back when I gave my press conference. And she's also likely to be the one who gave Cardin Winchester the gem that turned him into the Juggernaut. What other special fun tricks did she loot from the dragon's chamber?”

“I...” Ozpin actually sounded at a loss. “I can't say for certain...”

“No more cute little cryptic remarks and half truths, Oz,” Jaune said, taking a long, slow turn that would bring him near to the air ship. “I need all the information you can give me because we—the team you wanted me to put together—are riding out to fight the Star Dragon and trying to come up with some way to stop Cinder from taking over Arc Industries.”

Ozpin 'hmmed' quietly. “Yes, I agree. I suppose we'll have to start at the beginning. Cinder Fall was on our radar nine years ago when we suspected her of leading an attack against... a highly sensitive military target. The target managed to fight off their attackers, but couldn't make a positive identification, only a vague description. She was under surveillance until she started her association with you. We took that to mean she was of no consequence.”

“Thanks,” Jaune muttered.

“I'm only speaking from a tactical and security standpoint,” Ozpin swiftly covered.

“Right. So as it turns out she is of consequence and the dragon's chamber is some kind of magical treasure vault.”

There was a brief, awkward pause that told Jaune exactly what Ozpin was going to say next. “Actually, we did know that second part. SHIELD's predecessor organization was founded with the
defeat of the Star Dragon; and since the creature had already arrived with a trove of its own potent artifacts in the form of the rings, we stored captured artifacts in an antechamber just outside the chamber.”

Jaune felt his eyebrow twitch and himself get a year old having just heard that.

“You people saw a super-dangerous monster who uses dangerous devices... and decided to surround it with even more dangerous devices?!”

“That wasn't my choice; that was the decision of my distant predecessors.”

“Your predecessors were dangerous idiots!” Jaune burst out, visions of the Star Dragon waking up to find its rings gone but with tons of even worse things within easy reach. He took a moment to breath, trying to get a handle on himself.

Once he thought he could speak without screaming at the Director of SHIELD, he spoke again. As long as we're finally being open with information, Schnee's crossed a line and I think someone like you needs to step in—Dust knows Atlas isn't going to.”

With some trepidation, Ozpin asked, “What has Wilhelm done?”

Jaune had formulated his response while Ozpin was speaking. “He's experimenting with using Dust crystals to capture Grimm essence—and grafting that into living things. He's dangerously close to human trials.” As much as he wanted—needed to bring SHIELD down on Wilhelm Schnee's head, he similarly needed to no throw Weiss under the proverbial bus. It was bad enough that he couldn't entirely trust her between the Grimm inside her and her father being someone fully capable of using his daughter against the team with or without her compliance.

“You still there Professor?” Almost a minute had passed since he'd delivered his revelation.

“...never thought you would become so desperate,” he heard Ozpin murmur; words obviously not meant for his ears.

“Talk to me, Ozpin.”

Ozpin cleared his throat rather loudly. “Ah, yes. We will dispatch agents to learn more and react accordingly. We will also be dispatching every available agent to Vacuo to help in the battle.”

Jaune rolled his eyes inside his helmet. “How many of your agents are even going to scratch this thing?”

Another clearing of Ozpin's throat. “Few. However, my agents are being sent for the real reason for my call. You see some of our remaining embedded agents with the White Fang say that Adam Taurus is mobilizing all White Fang chapters in western Vacuo against the Atlasic military as it conducts its search and rescue missions after the earthquakes.”

“They're being sent to pin down Ironwood so he can't bring any of his major weapon systems to bear against the dragon,” Jaune realized. “And that's bad enough without...” He stopped an cursed as realization dawned on him. “Most the Atlasic Fleet is in Vale being overhauled to integrate into the Arc Network. That's why Cinder wanted me out of Vale.”

“What now?”

“Don't send your agents to Vacuo! Send them to Vale!”
Ozpin sputtered at the sudden turn. “What are you—”

“Because tomorrow morning, when Cinder Fall becomes CEO of Arc Industries, she’s going to have access to the entire Atlasian Southern Fleet!”

Jaune didn't give Ozpin time to argue because he needed every second to change his team's plans, make some calls, and hope against hope that he hadn't stupidly missed anything else.

RWBYRWBYRWBY

If General James Ironwood had been a lesser man, he would have cursed his luck. The very day he arrived in Vacuo to perform a surprise inspection on the Atlasian troops there, a series of major earthquakes had struck the mountainous region not far from his forward base.

If he'd been a more arrogant man, he'd have thought about how fortunate the outlying settlers and nomads who had moved into the area following its cleansing by the Jericho missile were to have him there. Most Atlasian officers would have shored up the largest, most established settlements and left the newer, weaker ones to fend for themselves.

But he was only really focused on the job—his duty—protecting humanity. That's the reason he found himself rolling across the blasted foothills of western Vacuo in a an Atlasian Combat Rover near the head of a military column at the cusp of sunrise.

He was starting to worry. Scouting reports were starting to get confused and frantic. Talk of green flames, ground collapses and even sightings of a huge, bizarre Grimm were leaking in... when the scouts even reported back before disappearing.

As a precaution, he'd had a missile launcher loaded with Arc Industries Packbuster missiles brought online and ready as well as having his best Specialist, Winter Schnee mount up on one of the outriders with one of the heavy Dust cannons the SDC had provided specifically for Atlasian Military Specialists.

Up ahead, the outrider jeep stopped at the top of a ridge. The column drew to a halt as they waited to hear news from them.

After a long moment, the radio crackled and Winter's voice spoke out. “Sir? We have a contact. And... I'm not certain how to classify it.”

“Not certain? Describe it.” Ironwood kept his voice calm but gruff, befitting a man of his station without being needlessly overbearing.

Winter stifled a trademark Schnee sigh at having to discuss something she didn't care for. “It's a large... creature, sir. Very large. Perhaps larger than a Goliath if my range finder is to be believed. Only... it isn't a Grimm. The coloration is all wrong. It's currently burning a settlement in the valley beyond this ridge, and...” she paused, cursing her training, which compelled her to report everything she saw. “...and it's wearing what appear to be purple trousers, sir.”

“...What.” Ironwood felt like it was a joke even if Winter Schnee barely had any sense of humor he was aware of.

“I assure you, sir: this is no joke.”

Sure enough, several miles distant, standing in the less-than-a-month-old walls of a settlement now alight with green fire and hemorrhaging fleeing forms of its poor, desperate residents, was a monster that nearly defied description.
Standing almost ten stories tall, the beast was bipedal with green scales that faded to vivid yellow scuta along its neck and chest. It's massive head was long like a horse's with flaring nostrils and fleshy whiskers arranged around a mouth full of razor teeth as long as a man's forearm. Its thick arms ended in scything talons and a long, lithe tail emerged from... what really did appear to be a pair of trousers made from some sort of slick purple fabric.

It would have looked comedic it it wasn't looming over a village full of dead and dying. It became less amusing than ever when it parted its fangs and spoke in a voice that boomed out over the valley. “Humans! Hear my words! Hear them and obey! My kin have been taken from me! Return them... or all will burn in the wrath of Fin Fang Foom!”

Winter didn't wait for orders. She knew what they would be. Stepping forward, she stepped into the traces of the Dust cannon mounted to the back of the jeep and flicked off the safety. A squeeze the left handle started the cannon's six barrels to start spinning up to speed.

“You sir,” she said more to herself than anyone, “have not seen wrath until you've witnessed that of Atla—”

She didn't get to finish as a shell exploded next to the jeep, flipping the vehicle on its side. Winter was thrown from her perch and sent rolling along the dusty rock. Gunfire erupted from the west along the top of an adjacent foothill. More shells burst around and in the midst of the military column.

Muttering a curse, even as she thanked whatever gods still watched over This Remnant for Aura, Winter got to her feet and set eyes on the assailants topping the hill. It didn't take a Specialist to recognize the wolf's head and claw marks of the White Fang.

They weren't just involving their Aura-users here. Waves of grunts, on foot and on motorbikes and jeeps roared over the hill, spraying fire and launching mortars. They were backed by the Dust-users of the Western Vacuo chapters of the Fang bearing their individual Hunter-style weapons... and one SDC heavy Dust canon.

The kind only Atlanian Specialists were issued.

A handful of explanations as to where the pig-eared man carrying it had gotten it came to mind for Winter. She liked none of them.

Her eyes darted to the jeep, only to find her own canon under the jeep. Oh, she could have easily kicked the vehicle over with an aura-powered kick and picked up the vehicle-mounted weapon... but the wrecked jeep served to give her half an excuse.

Reaching down, she drew her swords and prepared to summon her glyphs.

Then she got her next surprise of the day.

Above the noise of battle came a roar that accompanied the rising of the sun and an SDC-logoed airship soared overhead. It was too small to be responsible for all the noise, but she barely noticed, as the cargo door in the back of the ship opened and a trio of forms leapt out.

The first was in a set of black armor with white accents. Blue jets fired from its boots and gauntlets, slowing its fall until it landed part-way up the hill between the Atlansians and the White Fang. It—or rather she given the shape of their armor's breastplate—reached for her hip and drew a straight sword, taking up the scabbard in the other hand. Then she charged the faunus terrorists, tripping, incapacitating, and otherwise non-lethally downing White Fang left and right.
Next came someone in black and green armor. Winter couldn’t keep track of them. They hit the ground in a roll before disappearing into the ranks of the Fang where they started falling.

And finally there was a woman in a black padded body suit and domino mask, her ebon hair flowing behind her. She bounded down from the ship as it passed overhead, hit the top of the missile launcher, and hurled herself onto the nearest White Fang grunt, pulling him down like a panther taking prey.

Unlike the others who fought with precise, planned movements, this one fought with absolute ferocity. She sliced open one man's chest with her clawed hands, grabbed another by his ammo belt and threw him into another so hard they both hit the ground unmoving. Then she barreled into one more and Winter sword she bit his arm hard enough for him to drop his gun.

It was brutal to the point that Winter had to take a moment to tear herself away from watching it to rejoin the battle on her own. With a wave of her offhand weapon, she threw a line of glyphs up the hill, running along them shortly after.

Several Fang grunts turned their weapons on her, but with the speed and agility granted by Aura, she deflected the mundane bullets like she was swatting flies. Then she returned the favor to those who got too close, striking them down with quick, efficient strokes that either ended their lives or at least injured them badly enough to take them out of the fight.

At length, she reached the pig-eared faunus with the Dust cannon. He'd been distracted by yet another strange new entrant into the battle. It was another woman from the armor configuration and the... face sculpted into her full helmet along with 'hair' made of dozens of long, thin spikes. This one was flying overhead, raining fire from a plasma cannon.

The Fang Dust-user was trying to counter her with the cannon, but his aim wasn't the best to start with and his target was flying and extremely agile. He never even saw Winter coming, launching herself off her last glyph to spear him in the side of the head with a flying knee.

He crumpled like a tin can with a disturbing pop of a neck snapping. In a flash of steel, the retinue of foot soldiers meant to protect him joined him in death, leaving the way clear for Winter to sheath her swords and pick up the weapon.

Ice blue eyes narrowed as she span up the barrels and took aim at the weaponized Fang vehicles, sending Dust rounds into them, destroying them handily.

At some point in the battle, the once-clear sky had darkened with burgeoning thunderheads that sent down fat drops of rain. Thunder boomed over the valley as lightning began to flash.

And in the flash of one of those bolts, she saw something big flying in over the hill the White Fang had used for their attack. It resembled a bastardization of an Atlasian Paladin which had undergone a series of modifications and repairs including new legs and a strange generator device on its back that looked like a glowing blue disc.

The powered armor carried a sword almost as tall as it was, its edge lined with dozens of grinders imbued with Dust. And on it's chest was the symbol of the White Fang.

Adam Taurus in a rebuilt Crimson Dynamo—complete with a Generation 1 Arc Reactor—had joined the battle.

Chapter End Notes
Here we go! The next to final battle begins, Jaune gets to confront SHIELD, and we learn a bit about why there were other goodies in the chamber when Cinder robbed it.

And also Adam's back! I always intended to have his arc to wrap up with a fight with Blake and at the same time, I've learned that writing direct fights with giant monsters is boring, so I've been laying the groundwork for spicing up Fin Fang Foom's fight from around the time I introduced Yang. That's why she's Wasp/Giant Man: so she can fight him hand to hand. It's also why I let Adam get away before: so he could lead the Fang in this battle so there's more players for the street-levelers (Ren, Blake and to a certain extent Ruby) to fight.

I finally had opportunity to bring Ironwood and Winter into this. I really like both of these character even though I've sort of developed a disdain for Atlas as a whole. Between the SDC, which is apparently engineering as much if not more suffering and social disparity as real-world corporations despite being in a world where that sort of thing objectively attracts monsters and the whole 'militarized Hunter school' thing and then how pretty much everyone we've seen—even the ones I like—have this crushing superiority complex, yeah I'm not a fan of Atlas. Mostly because of Jacques and the company he keeps.

Anyway, I think Ironwood is an earnest if short-sighted man. None of his mistakes seem to be his own. Bringing an army to Vale? Smart. Making an army entirely out of robots and bringing them to a place with the network security of a wet paper bag and linking to that network? Dumb. Pretty much everything to do with Penny minus keeping her secret? Hella Smart. Listening to anything Mr. 'I Have Made a Ton Of Mistakes Let Me Make More' says? Unforgivably dumb. Yet in the end if anyone's going to be an adult the fixes things, it's going to be him.

Winter is just a fun character from what we've seen of her... if not just an older version of Weiss. Her relationship to Qrow seems a LOT like Weiss's early one with Ruby. The fact that, like Weiss, she's totally willing to stoop to shenanigans without seeming to know she's doing it makes me really like her. Look for her to have a bigger role in the sequel.

And finally, we've got our first look at Fin Fang Foom. No one's engaged with him yet, but the important thing is, he's got his pants. If you're wondering why he's talking about 'his kin', it's because it was later revealed that the rings (which became the Manderin's Ten Rings) are actually the minds and souls of legendary members of his race.

Anyway, the penultimate battle begins next chapter!
“I can't tell if we got here in time or if we got here late.” Jaune was standing at the rear ramp of his plane, watching the bulk of his team helping turn the tide of the battle as they relieved the pressure the White Fang was putting on the Atlasian forces enough for them to rally.

Pyrrha rested a hand on his shoulder as she came to join him. “We arrived as fast as we could and we're clearly making a difference. That's the best we can hope for.”

He nodded, knowing the truth of her words, but not completely believing it. His mind whirled at the possibilities: if he'd figured Cinder out earlier, if he'd let Ruby trick out the plane like she'd wanted to before they left, if he'd used the Falcon's speed to rendezvous with Ironwood on his own...

As if sensing his doubts, Pyrrha squeezed his shoulder. “It's time for us to do our parts too. Are you sure you want me to join the battle instead of helping with the Star Dragon?”

Jaune took a deep breath. “Yeah. Let's face it, Pyr: you're the best anti-personnel fighter on the team. With you down there, we'll be able to route the Fang that much faster so everyone can help with the dragon.” He smiled at her. “Besides, it's not like I'll be alone. Nora's building up a nice thunderstorm, and I've got my lil' bitty secret weapon, right Yang?” He looked to his other shoulder and held up his index finger to give his diminutive compatriot a fight five.

Only there was no Yang where there was supposed to be.

“...Damnit, Yang!” He took a deep breath. It's not like he wasn't surrounded by willful folks already. Case in point his attempts to keep his family from going to Vale after he deduced Cinder's main objective was the Atlasian Fleet. Him telling them to turn around only made his family more adamant about being there to help if things went pear-shaped.

He guessed Pyrrha's question even as she drew a breath to ask it. “The second she saw Adam here, she went to help Blake. Shouldn't have expected anything else. Doesn't change the plan though. She's not going to miss her chance to punch a dragon.”

Pyrrha nodded and they were both silent for a moment. She was the one that broke the quiet. “Jaune... you're going into terrible danger.” With a firm hand, she maneuvered him around the face her. “Just make sure you come back to me, okay?”

It didn't matter how hard he tried avoiding them, Jaune couldn't resist looking into those deep, entrancing green eyes. They filled him with confidence where he normally had none because in them he saw her unwavering belief in him. She'd believed in him since before they even met, and if he told her he was coming back, that would be all the assurance she'd need that he was.

So now he knew he'd damn sure better find a way to survive this.

“I will.” He reached up with a gauntleted hand and raised her chin with a finger. Then he kissed her with as much passion and honesty as he could muster. When they parted, he added, “You have my word.”

“And an Arc never breaks his word.” she finished the mantra quietly. Then she closed her helmet.
He followed suit. “Then let's go to work.” He backed away from her, half-jogging down the ramp and out into open space. As he did, he sent a few last minute instructions to Glynda to raise the plane above the storm Nora was brewing to keep it out of the way of any inbound Atlasian air support.

Then he opened his wings, fired the supersonic repulsers... and cranked his sound system across the channel shared by the team. A female vocalist started in: 'Come at me / And you'll see / I'm more than meets the eye / You think that / You'll break me / You're gonna find in time...'

Opening the wings, he angled himself upward and fired the supersonic repulser banks, rocketing himself skyward in the direction of the Star Dragon. As the song continued, Jaune had Glynda break into the channels the White Fang were using just so Adam would hear a particular line: 'Sending out your army, but you still can't win / Listen up, silly boy, 'cuz I'm gonna tell you why... / I burn!'

As much as he wanted to handle the Crimson Dynamo himself, he had bigger fish to fry—and onward her flew to meet his destiny as the Star Knight.

Meanwhile, Pyrrha dropped out of the plane as it began to climb. Hanashite was in its plasma cannon form charging up a blast of plasma while Kiku was tucked up tight to her side. She didn't bother firing repulsers until just before she landed, using her semblance to transform the plasma into a lash that slammed into a half dozen White Fang soldiers at once, bowling them over. Then she launched Kiku, sending the shield into the shoulder of an antlered man wielding a Dust-rifle, dislocating it. The shield then returned of its mistress's hand in time for her to use it to smack a charging grunt in the face.

Shifting Hanashite into its nagimaki form, she used the polearm to trip another soldier, then swung it around to catch another under the chin. A jeep roared past, a woman with long, floppy ears manning a 50 caliber mounted gun. Pyrrha applied her semblance and the jeep rolled onto its side.

Returning her attention to another group of incoming soldiers, she was interrupted by a black blur that slammed into their leader. Weiss tackled the burly man with a short trunk to the ground and raked his chest with a set of metallic claws attached to her gloves. Kevlar armor separated and the only thing keeping his flesh from being torn open was his Aura. Frustrated at the lack of blood, Weiss rolled off him, grabbing his arm in the process, and brutally dislocated his shoulder before leaping onto the next faunus to cross her path.

This one, a lean man with a leopard pattern on his skin, tried to block with his rifle, but Weiss grabbed it and bent the weapon around his arms. Thus trapped, he was defenseless as she backed up, then kicked him with an Aura and Grimm-powered strike that bent him double and sent him flying a good twenty feet into the side of a passing trooper on a motorbike. Men and vehicle went careening down the hill in a heap.

Flashing claws and savage fisticuffs soon left the squad that faced Weiss broken and in agony. Her inner Grimm surged at the pain it inflicted, relishing it far more than delivering simple death. She forced herself not to linger, mentally bribing the monster with more pain to inflict on the rest of the Fang.

Further up the hill, Adam landed the Crimson Dynamo, a bulwark on the battlefield as he rained lightning and rockets down on the Atlasians. He saw the fights going on in his ranks and ignored them. His objectives were clear: destroy Ironwood's missiles, stall out the military, and on a more personal note, hunt down and kill Jaune Arc. No more games, no more torture, no more threats to what he loved. Arc was no longer just a personal vendetta—he was a threat to the cause he'd dedicated his life to; that Blake had died in the service of.
Adam's eyes widened with shock. Not only was this a Specialist, but a Schnee; two of his favorite things to kill. Shoudering the newest version of his grinder-ax, he instead brought the missile pods slung under his arm online. Each missile was enriched with Burn Dust for maximum yield and would be more than enough to breath through the Aura of most normal hunters. So for Winter Schnee, he brought three online and... received a an error in his heads-up display.

'Launch Failure – Pod Failed To Open'
'Launch Failure – Pod Failed To Open'
'Launch Failure – Pod Failed To Open'

Adam checked his instruments and found nothing wrong mechanically, so he went to raise the arm only to find it restrained—by a very familiar black ribbon. No sooner did he turn to look a it than the pistol mode of the Gambol Shroud, attached to the end of said ribbon, unleashed a volley of Dust rounds directly into his face plate.

He barely noticed as he shook his armor's limb free of the the Gambol Shroud and turned so his gaze could follow the ribbon back to its owner.

Though ensconced in a set of Hematite armor with no paint job, just a coat of black sealant, Adam knew that only one woman could wield Gambol Shroud so expertly. He froze, staring at her.

“Blake?” His quiet utterance boomed out of the Crimson Dynamo's speakers. “You're... you're alive! You've come back to me!” Then his wits came back to him and he remembered that she'd just stopped him from using his missiles and more importantly shot him. “W-what are you doing?”

It took Blake a few seconds longer than she'd have liked to get her own external speakers on, but when she did, she spoke with all the conviction she could summon. “I'm doing what I should have done years ago. I thought I could still find a way to redeem the White Fang... to redeem you. But after having seen what you did in the Emerald Forest? What you're doing here? I see that you are least are too far gone to save. So I'm putting an end to your days leading the Fang right now.”

Rage welled up him. Betrayal after the brief spark of hope he'd felt upon seeing her alive and well kindling it into something so hot, so volatile that it frightened even him. “How... HOW DARE YOU!” With a heave amplified by an unconscious use of his Aura, Adam heaved with the arm trapped by Gambol Shroud. The suddenness of the action allowed him to pull Blake off the ground, whip her around and slam her into the rocky ground.

“You're turning against me? Again!? After I trained you? After all we've been through together? After how much I loved you!” He grabbed the grinder ax off his back with his now-free arm and raised it on high, grinders whirring to full life. With all his pain, all his hate, and all his twisted
love, he brought it down—only for the 'Blake' he struck to become a pillar of stone with the sound of a gunshot. The huge cleaver was trapped by the stone doppleganger a few moments before the grinders chewed it apart.

It was a few moments where he wasn't watching where his opponents were. And a few moments for Winter Schnee to plant herself, summon up an acceleration glyph, and fire a dozen heavy Dust rounds at mach two into the Dynamo's side.

With his Aura backing the armor, Adam didn't take much damage, but the impact knocked him over on his side. That was just the opening his third attacker needed.

Speeding across the uneven landscape by skating on a thin layer of his own Aura, Lie Ren emerged from a knot of defeated White fang grunts and arrowed straight for their leader. As Adam started to rise, Ren dropped to a knee, sliding beneath the armor's legs and slashing at the armored ankles with the integrated bayonets of the Stormflower pistols. Sparks flew as he tore through the armor plates. Unfortunately, the bayonets were too short to reach anything truly vital. So he twisted around and fired up into the space where the machine's hips met its torso, Dust rounds pounding the actuators there.

Adam quickly grokked to what he was doing though and swatted him away before rising and laying down enough fire from the minigun built into his other arm to force Winter to break off her attack and take cover behind a flipped over jeep.

"Stop interfering!" He screamed. "This is between myself and the love of my life!"

"You still think you can call me 'your love'?" Blake sounded disgusted as she stomped toward him, Gambol Shroud in blade form with its sheath in her opposite hand. "Maybe you loved me once. Maybe like a mentor to a pupil; maybe like a dear friend; maybe even once like a lover—but then you decided you loved revenge and bloodshed more than me. And me? I found real love and then left it behind. I guess I have you to thank though, Adam. Because of what you did: kidnapping Jaune and Pyrrha? You brought me back to the people who really love me."

"And just where are they? I'll kill them too if they think they can take you from me."

"RIGHT HERE!"

A flash of orange and blue came from almost directly beneath him, growing and resolving into A figure in yellow and black armor: Yang Xiao Long the Unstoppable Wasp. Combining her own strength, that of her armor, and the momentum of her growth, she delivered an uppercut that lifted the Crimson Dynamo five feet in the air and launched it twenty feet back to roll along the ground.

Yang took a boxer's stance, holding her 'stings' like brass knuckles with electricity arcing across them. "I've been waiting ten years to kick your ass—ever since Blake started telling us about what her life was like when the Fang turned terrorist." She made a goading gesture. "Get up you piece of garbage. I want you on your feet when I feed you your teeth."

"Garbage!?!" Metal screamed as Adam forced the Crimson Dynamo to standing much faster than its specs would allow. "You're calling me garbage, human?!" The dynamos on his shoulders span up and the current channeled up into his grinder ax as he deployed four jet engines from panels on his back surrounding the Mk 1 Arc Reactor. "If you're the one Blake's put me aside for, then I'll be happy to put you in your place—IN THE GROUND!"

And with that, he charged. Yang replied in kind, the two titans of the battle rushing to meet one another in direct combat.
When the Star Dragon, Fin Fang Foom came down from the mountain spewing green fire, the people of the unnamed settlement fled in all directions, grabbing whatever they could carry and leaping into whatever conveyance could move to try and find away from the unexpected nightmare.

They'd been lucky on some level that they'd already been preparing to evacuate in the wake of the earthquake.

Some luckier than others. For example, a pair of families had piled into a Great War-era armored personnel carrier known as a Humpback to make their getaway. The heavily armored tracked vehicle was tough enough to protect traveling settlers from Grimm as strong as Ursas—but it was slower than molasses running uphill in winter. While Fin Fang Foom had been more occupied attacking homes and those who tried to fight back against him, eventually the slow transport caught his eye.

The driver, a woman in her fifties, could only watch helplessly via the rearview mirrors as the mighty dragon gathered green flame in his mouth and...

Something white flashed passed her and the Humpback lurched violently. She goggled, looking around as the land around her started to fall away. The Humpback... was flying.

Beneath said carrier, Jaune urged the supersonic repulsers to full power as he took on the full eight tons of the Humpback, lifting it up and southward just ahead of a massive ball of green flame that exploded into the ground where the transport would have been without his help.

Warnings sprang up in his heads-up display. The air where the explosion struck was suddenly filled with toxic fumes: chlorine, carbonic acid, and hydrogen among others. The flame were acidic.

With great effort, Jaune set the Humpback down and turned to face the Star Dragon. The ancient enemy of his bloodline. He expected to find himself facing down a mindless, raging animal, but instead, as he flew up and brought his weapons to bear, he saw the dragon pause in his rampage and the look in the monster's face was considering. And deeply intelligent.

A chaotic monster he knew how to handle. Something with an intellect? Jaune wasn't about to take chances. Switching the wings around to plasma cannon mode, he fired a pair of blasts at the dragon before he made up his mind what to do. The shots struck true, splashing their sun-hot payload across the monster's chest.

The results were no encouraging. Foom hissed in pain and drew back, sounding more like someone who had just burned the roof of their mouth with coffee instead of someone who had just been struck by super-hot gas.

Worse was what came next. Foom laughed. “What have we here? A new nuisance from the humans: one that soars on the wings of an angel.”

Jaune was so surprised that the Star Dragon could talk that it took him longer than it should have for him to turn on his external speakers. “I'm going to be more than a nuisance if you keep attacking innocent people. How about you go back to sleep and we forget all about this? I've got a lot of things on my plate right now.”

Foom growled, the sound sending a tiny tremor through the ground that could be felt a mile distant.
“Innocent?” He asked, almost a whisper. Then he roared. “INNOCENT?!” They are thieves and interlopers! They crept into my ship while I slumbered and STOLE MY KIN!”

This he punctuated with a massive green fireball aimed right for Jaune.

Drawing Croacea Mors, and expanding the Aegis into its shield form, Jaune curled himself up behind his shield and the wings of his suit, praying incongruously that the fireball was enough to kill him outright so it would trigger the Aegis's backlash.

The green flames whipped around him like a river breaking around rapids. The Aegis protected him, but even with his Aura behind it, the finish on the wings were eaten away by the acidic compound that fueled the conflagration. Warnings flashed across the heads-up display about the toxic morass engulfing him as all the seals in the suit closed, kicking him into self-contained breathing mode.

After a good ten seconds, the onslaught dissipated and Jaune used the Aegis like a fan to clear the air around him.

The shield caught Foom's eye—and it did not please him.

“I know that symbol. I know that shield. I know what it can do. Fool me once... well I suppose all civilizations have that saying.” Rather than attack with his fire again, the dragon reached down and drove his claws into the earth, hooking them beneath the foundation of a nearby house. With a colossal heave, he uprooted the entire structure and hurled it at Jaune.

Such was the might of Fin Fang Foom that there was no time to dodge from a hovering standstill. So Jaune raised the Aegis and fired the supersonic repulsers at full power. There wasn't much room for acceleration, but he struck the incoming building at around three hundred miles and hour—more than enough to turn him into an unrecognizable smear inside a heap of wrecked metal.

...if not for the Aegis.

This time he heard the backlash, felt it in his chest. It was as if a great tension he wasn't aware of was released and then the house simply exploded. All of the force that should have gone into transforming him into a large can of potted meat was channeled and amplified back into its source, pulverizing stone, crushing metal and reducing wood to clouds of splinters.

In the blink of an eye, the house became a rapidly expanding ball of flying rubble—and out of the other side of it flew Jaune Arc, the Star Knight, dragging a column of dust in his wake.

“Yeah, you're right,” he said, leading with his sword as he closed on Foom. “We've got that saying too. But I'm not the guy you fought before. I've got a whole bunch of new moves.”

Undaunted, Foom faced the accelerating armored hero. “And since you humans stole my kin from me,” He clapped his hand before him, the resultant shockwave slamming into an unprepared Jaune and sending him veering wildly off-course in his charge. As he passed, Foom swept his tail around, slapping Jaune across the back hard enough the drive him through the roof off a building.

“I have many 'moves' you haven't seen as well.”

Chapter End Notes
Hot damn do I love writing big fight scenes.

Of course Adam's last stand has to come down to hims vs Blake and Yang. I've seen theories that in canon it might be Sun because he's Sun Wukong and that might make Adam Bull Satan (does that make Blake Sanzo and Neptune Sagojo? Who's Cho Hakai?), but for maximum emotional satisfaction, Yang has to be part of it. HAS TO.

Of course in Arc Reaction, the Fall of Beacon never happened, Yang never lost an arm... but Blake disappeared for about five years, then Yang thought Blake died because of Adam, so... yeah, she still wants to hurt him.

Winter is included in this fight because there's this implication in the show that the Schnee's have lost at least some family to the Fang and the faunus are certainly being mistreated by the SDC, so of course Adam would want to get some Schnee-killing cred and Weiss is in Bagheera form and therefore unrecognizable.

Ren is here because... well frankly I couldn't make the sequence that's about to happen next chapter work without him.

On the other end of the battle, I'm really happy with how Jaune and Pyrrha's scene together came out. It's partially based on the cargo plane scene that was in the Iron Man 2 trailer but not the movie except it's Pyrrha that ends up doing the superhero landing at the end of it.

Then there's the fight with Foom.

Writing fights with giant monsters fighting smaller characters is always tricky. You can't just have them hit each other or someone goes splat. Buuuut the Aegis is in play. Note that the Aegis only works if it blocks the attack. When Jaune gets hit in the back, the Aegis doesn't help at all, much like Cap's shield.

Which brings me to one thing I wanted to address. For the longest time I was trying to codify which characters were mashed up with who, but since these are all RWBY original-flavor characters who just happen to get these roles and power sets, none of these really came out as 1-1 translations and I willfully started pulling in other traits.

So here's a quick rundown of what I at least consciously did:

Jaune – Tony Stark / Captain America (more in the finale than here. Be patient) / Various armors – Swordsman, Falcon, Sentry, ???
Pyrrha – Iron Man (Ironically, Iron Man is now a girl in canon) / Pepper Potts (Rescue)
Nora – Thor (duh) / Hercules
Ren – Coulson / Hawkeye / Iron Fist
Ruby – Spider-man / Scarlet Spider
Yang – Wasp / Giant Man
Weiss – Black Cat (Spider-man: the Animated Series) / Black Panther
Blake – Black Widow (Though Blake is largely just... herself)

Ozpin – Nick Fury
Gris – Daredevil
Rey – Bullseye / Hawkeye / Amadeus Cho
Verte – Gambit

Wilhelm Schnee – Norman Osborn
Cinder Fall – Warmonger / Mandarin / ??? (oh my god, just wait.)

Anyway, yeah. That's what I'm thinking as I write this.

Next chapter, we finish out these battles and move on to the final arc of this story. And we might get to see who Jaune called.
Since his defeat in the Emerald Forest, Adam Taurus had worked the White Fang's scientists nearly to death improving and upgrading the Crimson Dynamo. From copying the original Arc Reactor, adding two more jet engines, and enhancing the armor, he had them do everything possible to make the bulky, monstrous armor into the best fighting machine it could possibly be.

Yang Xiao-Long on the other had had spent the lion's share of her twenty-odd years making herself into the best fighting machine possible. Then she acquired a set of powered armor and a belt that made her really, really huge.

In a knuckle-to-knuckle dust up, there wouldn't have been any contest. But Adam had no intention of making what they were having a fair fight. Increasing the power output to his grinder-ax, he drove the deadly weapon beyond its normal maximum. And he didn't aim for the body. No, Aura was more concentrated there and combined with Yang's armor and skills, he'd never score a telling blow there.

Instead, he swung for the arm she had cocked back to punch him, aiming for the elbow where the armor was necessarily light to allow mobility. In his mania to savage her, he even poured his Aura into the ax. Using the momentum of her own punch, he'd tear through armor and flesh alike, maim the woman who corrupted his Blake, then as she suffered, he'd put a brutal end to her but putting the ax through her skull.

That was the plan at least.

It failed because where Yang's arm had been there was suddenly just a cloud of orange and blue particles that the murderous grinders passed through harmlessly.

Yang in the meantime, finished shrinking to her normal size and dodged out of Adam's way, catching Blake's Gamble shroud in its kusari-gama form as she did. Blake was hold on to the other end and, as soon as Yang caught her weapon, triggered an Earth dust round in the gun alongside her Semblance, leaving a stone doppelganger of herself standing in her place, holding the ribbon.

Combined with Yang, the stone Blake held the ribbon taut as the Crimson Dynamo, cruising forward at at least fifty miles and hour, hit it and was tripped into a sprawling fall. Adam didn't have time to cut the jets, so the suit plowed forward across the hard ground, digging a furrow in the earth.

Spiderweb cracks formed all over the Freeze Dust windscreen, rendering the projected Heads-Up Display mostly useless. The fall also tore the grinder-ax from his grasp and tore off entire panels of armor along the front of the suit.

He finally cut the jets and came to a rest some thirty yards from where he'd trip.

Lie Ren was waiting for him. Though he'd balked at wearing the armor, he was finding a lot of value in one component of his current load-out. That would be the helmet, which came with a high resolution screen connected directly to Jaune's personal AI.

In his view, a junction box secreted at the nape of the armor's neck, concealed beneath the edge of the Arc Reactor, became highlighted in green. “Such shameful, sloppy engineering,” said a voice.
that reminding him uncomfortably of Glynda Goodwitch, “They've run the wiring for all the suit's targeting systems through this single junction box.”

“Thank you, Computer.” Ren couldn't bring himself to call the AI 'Glynda', but he followed her directions like she was the real thing, leaping onto the back of the downed Crimson Dynamo. Enhanced with Aura, the blades of the Stormflower made short work of the box's lid, revealing a mess of wires and switches inside.

Glynda helpfully highlighted one specific set of wires in orange. “The indicated leads connect to the targeting systems.”

“Right.” Ren deftly slashed said wires.

Inside the armor, Adam saw his targeting reticules all blink out at once and realized what was happening. Planting the armor's hands on the ground, he lived up to his namesake and bucked like a Brahma bull, throwing his attacker off him. Then he stood and opened fire with the machine guns mounted to his right arm. They missed hopelessly as he no longer had a way to compensate for the fact that his armor's arm was four feet from where his actual arm controlling it was.

His need to take time to adjust gave Ren more than enough time to get to his feet and scramble away.

Adam didn't get a chance to pursue as Winter Schnee struck him from the side, burying one of the swords to the hilt in the shoulder joint of his right arm. With a roar of rage, he grabbed her with the opposite arm and hurled her hard against the ground.

It was only once she lay on the hard ground before him did he realize what prize had been delivered up to him. Pointing the missile rack on his left arm at him, he grinned savagely. “You have no idea how long I've been waiting for this.”

“Funny.” A heavy hand turn him around by way of yanking on Winter's sword. Yang Xiao Long shot Adam's feral grin right back at him. “Oh, I think I've got an idea.”

Then she punched him in the robot bead basket.

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Jaune dismissed all the damage warnings and auto-repair notices that had popped up from being thrown through... he checked briefly—three stone buildings. It actually came as a shock that he'd suffered no critical damage from that.

Aura plus power armor was a tough combination to beat.

Then again, so was Fin Fang Foom, who was currently stalking across the burning town trying to find where Jaune had finally come to rest.

Loathe as he was to admit it, there didn't seem to be a means of sciencing his way out of this situation. Luckily, he had a goddess on staff just for that sort of occasion. “Nora?” He asked looking to the storm-wracked skies. “You're up.”

“Finally!” Came the reply over the comms. Pink sheet lightning raced across the clouds from horizon to horizon and the thunder spoke with Nora's voice. “Ho, Monster! You think you'll be allowed to harm the good people of Midgard?”

The sheet lightning returned from whatever errand its mistress had sent it on, striking and
coalescing into something like a tornado made of electricity that rotated around the head of Magnahild.

“I say thee nay.”

She thrust the mighty hammer forward and something like the ur lightning bolt—some ten feet across and more than two miles long—crackled out and struck Foom in the chest, hurling the dragon sidelong into what passed as the town plaza. Stone screamed and exploded, dust flew and for a moment, Fin Fang Foom was hidden from sight.

But then his voice preceded him. “Asgardian!” A green fireball annihilated the dust and streaked across the sky only for Nora to bat it aside with Magnahild. Still he rose from the ruined plaza, teeth bared. “This does not concern you!”

His answer came in the form of a thrown Magnahild cracking against his jaw before returning to Nora's hand. “Yeah, well Jaune-y here's my friend, so it does concern me. So if you want a fight? Have at thee!”

Foom narrowed his eyes. “So be it.”

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Yang leveled blow after staggering blow at the Crimson Dynamo. Adam was caught on his back foot, using his armor’s barely functional right arm to absorb the attacks. He was pouring his Aura into the armor by the bucket, but was still losing ground as Yang vented almost a decade of rage on him.

“You think you even have the right to say you were avenging her?! It wasn't you who spent years picking up the pieces you left behind!” A hard left won through and struck the Dynamo in the side, making the struts where the ribs would be on a person creak.

“Being there for night terrors! For the guilt after ever White fang attack! Having to talk her down from going back and trying to 'save' you idiots!” She mixed things up with the rare kick, snapping her heel into the suit's thigh.

At her current size, she was airing dirt laundry to the entire wasteland, but she didn't care. “You call yourself living her? Then why did you help destroy the one thing she loved most?!” She timed the frustrated snarl perfectly with a swift uppercut that got past Adam's arm and stuck him right in the underside of his helmet, scoring a ringing blow, staggering him.

Looking every bit as savage as Fin Fan Foom, Yang loomed before him with hate in her eyes. “For everything you did to my best friend—I could end you right now.” Then she smirked and leaned forward. “But I'm not the one that deserves it.”

Taking her cue, Blake use Yang's angled back to vault into the air, high above the reeling Adam Taurus and the Crimson Dynamo. She flipped in the air, then brought her feet together, pointing the sharp heels of her armor toward the armor below her.

Then she triggered her Semblance alongside an Earth Dust round. A clone of solid rock replaced her as she retreated into the space above it and pressed her palms down onto its shoulders, adding her weight to its fall—Directly into the Arc Reactor.

Unlike its miniaturized counterparts, the original Arc Reactor wasn't designed for combat situations and Adam had put so much pressure on the White Fang scientists to put as many weapons and components on the armor that they never had time to replace the Lucite shell with
something that could stand up to a motivated Huntress.

The combined weight of Blake and the stone simulacrum struck the Reactor at two points only about an inch across each. It was more than enough to smash right through, Blake escaping the first reactionary gout of plasma from the breech by leaving a shadow clone.

Inside the Dynamo, alerts screamed and even in his feverish anger, Adam realized what that meant. Despite his dictatorial demands on them, the scientists had insisted on making him sit down and listening to what would happen if the reactor got breached: Run.

Panicking, he scrambled for the ejection handle and pulled it hard. For a terrifying second, nothing happened. Then the explosive bolts went off, blowing the armor apart at strategic intervals, freeing him from it before a set of rockets mounted on the back of his jumpsuit launched him clear. He hit the ground hard, his Aura shattering and he rolled to a painful stop on hands and knees.

It wasn't a second too soon. Blue plasma became a swirling, dancing storm around the damaged reactor, crackling across the blasted ground. Then the palladium core went critical, exploding in a ring of energy that threw everyone—friend and foe alike—to the ground and extended a column of blue fire heavenward until it disappeared into space.

Caught in the grip of a panic attack, Adam struggled to his knees—only to find the Gambol Shroud's scabbard pressing down in the top of his head, its attendant blade clutched in Blake's hand as she pointed it at his face.

“Blake,” he said weakly, feeling his memory of all the good times they'd ha together: a first meeting at a young age where they'd both been shooed out so the adults could talk freely, sparring sessions where he'd taught the slightly younger girl all the sword stances he'd learned at his lessons, standing side-by-side protesting. The day she'd returned to him after leaving the Cause (not him, never him) for Beacon. “My love.”

“No.” She said, sounding tired, and a little sad though so much of that sadness had been spent. “You loved having a sidekick. A partner in crime. No me. At least not more than you loved your own hate. I foresee you having a lot of time to think about that.”

Around the two, glyphs were forming on the ground. From them rose more than a dozen white-glowing beowolves. They stalked menacingly toward Adam, snarling.

Winter Schnee weaved her way between the monsters to put a hand on Blake's shoulder. “I can take things from here. With his Aura shattered, there's not much he can do now.”

Blake nodded. “Thank you.” It did her good knowing there was at least one other decent Schnee in the world. “I have to go with my friend to see about punching a dragon.”

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At that moment, the dragon was, in fact, punching one of her friends. And regretting it.

Pink sparks ran up Foom's arm as Nora's electrical summoning punished him for the act of smashing her to the ground. While she was still down, he jammed one hand into a plastic dumpster and swung again, hammering her into the packed dirt rode such that she actually sunk into the ground.

When he went for another blow, a beam of blue light streaking skyward made him stop and marvel in confusion.
He regretted that too. A different blue beam—Jaune's unibeam—struck the side of his head, making him flinch aside from the surprise if not from pain.

"Really? The impressed you?" Jaune asked. "You see those in pretty much every movie these days."

"Yeah!" Nora chirped, hopping back up as if she hadn't just been driven into the ground like a cartoon character. "Even I know that and I've only been here for like a month!"

Foom snarled at both of them. "You jest so flippantly at a time like this?! I expect this from the humans, but how far has Asgard fallen if Odin's own daughter mocks the brazen theft of the sacred dead."

"Wait," Jaune said, "What?"

Even if he had heard him, Foom didn't get a chance to answer as a massive yellow-armored fist came flying in to smash him in the side of the face with enough force the cause a thunderclap as it sent the great dragon sprawling.

"No worries, Jaune Boy!" Yang announced, straightening up from her big right cross, "The cavalry has arrived!"

And indeed they had. Blake and Ren, who had been riding on giant Yang's shoulders dropped from their perches into fighting stances. Ruby, who had been riding on her head along with Weiss, took her best friend and partner and webbed their way to a nearby roof that hadn't been leveled yet.

Pyrrha hovered overhead, keeping a watchful eye on the dragon as he righted himself.

As Nora got to her feet and Jaune flew into a better offensive position, they formed an impressive front against their enemy.

But then Yang wasn't finished yet.

"Listen up, Scaley! You did this town wrong. Who knows how many people you've killed, hurt or just made homeless today with this—not to mention with your earthquakes earlier. So you know what? We're here to make you pay for that. We're going to avenge those folks."

"Hey, that'd bee a pretty cool team name!" Ruby called. "We can be The Avengers!"

"Yeah we—d'oh. Ruby! I was going to say that!"

"Sorry!"

Foom didn't see the humor in any of it. "More thieves! More aggressors! Don't you see? It doesn't matter how many of you there are. All of you will fall before my wrath for stealing my kin!"

"Blah, blah, blah!" Yang mocked. "It's time for your kick-kicking, now be a good boy and bend over."

"Then you'll be the first to burn."

Foom started to inhale, charging his acidic fireball.

"Wait!" Jaune interposed himself between his team and the dragon—only he was facing his team. This even gave the mighty Fin Fang Foom pause. "Hold on a minute. I think we're missing something here."
“What the hell are you talking about?” Yang demanded.

“Jaune?” Pyrrha asked over the comms.

Slowly, holding his hands up to show his repulsers weren't charged, Jaune turned to face the dragon. He'd been thinking throughout the fight, then during Yang's speech. Things weren't adding up and now he wasn't sure the Star Knight could defeat him. But maybe Jaune Arc, the guy who fought with his mind and tried to put his compassion to work even when it came to fighting terrorists, could stop his rampage.

“Before we have this giant throw-down, can I ask one question?”

Curious and just a little amused, Fin Fang Foom inclined his head to tell the tiny human to go ahead.

“What do you mean when you say your 'Kin' were stolen?”

Chapter End Notes

Curse the fact that so many people guessed this fight would end this way. I guess it was kind of obvious in how I was building up Jaune and that the real climax is going to be against Cinder, but still.

Of course the big thing here was the end of the Crimson Dynamo fight. This one was one of the most important set pieces for me because this fic has kind of been a bit of a catharsis for Vol 3, it had to deliver on both Blake and Yang's emotional through-lines when it came to Adam and sort of make up for the fact that Blake is the most 'mundane' character here besides Ren in terms of powers. I hope the fight was satisfying to Yang and Blake fans.

Winter coming in with the wolfpack at the end was taken from a fic idea I had that sort of died before it began about Winter being the middle child with Weiss older... like I said it never got far. In a nutshell, it was kind of Winter being Blake's friend while Weiss remains cold over the the White Fang thing.

Also sky beam! We have sky beam! One of the things you NEED to be a Marvel film. And don't worry, I'll hit the other two before we're done.

One more chapter of the Fin Fang Foom and and we're on to the grand finale, friends! Let's rock and roll!

Oh and someone asked what I would do if I did this for DC? Just off the top of my head, It'd be a Young Justice/Teen Titans type thing with...

Jaune Arc – Blue Beetle (the best DC character even if everything since the New 52 involving him solo has been garbage)
Pyrrha Nikos – Starfire
Nora Vakyrie – Cyborg (Yes.)
Lie Ren – Arsenal
Weiss Schnee – Robin (Damian Wayne)
Ruby Rose – Kid Flash
Yang Xiao Long – Superboy
Blake Belladonna – Artemis
Sun WuKong – Beast Boy
Neptune – Aqualad (Kaldur'ahn)
Penny Polendina – Miss Martian

Make of that what you will. Someone is doing a Jaune/Blue Beetle thing and a Spider-Jaune one so I probably won’t do my own.

 Probably.

Game On and Shattered Stars incoming.
... Assemble!

It wasn't lost on Jaune that he was the perfect size and in just the right position for Fin Fang Foom to end him with a well placed chomp. Just a delicious little Arc snack for the mighty Star Dragon.

But he trusted to hope that 'kin' meant the same to Foom as it did to him. Why else would he rampage to retrieve them? Honestly, he had no idea what all Cinder and/or the White Fang had stolen from him, but whatever they were had meaning to Foom above all else.

He was vindicated when the great beast narrowed it's eyes, drew a breath, and uttered, “You really don't know, do you?”

“That's why we're here. Talk to me, big guy.”

Foom growled, not in anger, but in contemplation. “You are the Star Knight, are you not? I recognize the shield. That crest is unmistakable.”

“That's what people keep telling me. Though that's mostly because my ancestor was... well the guy who fought you back in the day.” Jaune fell into idle gestures with his hands as the conversation veered away from killing him.

“The first one to try to rob me of my Kin,” rumbled Foom. “I had crashed upon this miserable rock and was set upon by the terrible black and white creatures that inhabit this world. Soon after dispatching them, I discovered my battle had been witnessed by humans. They thought me a monster and attacked. Wounded and enraged, I fought carelessly and was driven off.

“That would have been the end of it, if only the Star Knight hadn't sought to pursue me for my Kin: the ten sacred stones of my rings that serve as the final resting place of the greatest of my people. We fought on the run for days before finally I was able to retreat to my ship and collapse the mountain down around the entrance.”

Jaune gaped at the account. He was shocked, but given the events of the past few days, he was feeling like he shouldn't. All his life, he'd been raised in awe of the Arc family. They always kept their word, protected the helpless and did what was right.

Only that wasn't true. His own father had broken his word because he cared about Jaune's dreams. Jaune himself had selfishly turned his back on his family out of anger, allowing himself to be easily manipulated into total estrangement from them.

And truth be told? He'd thought a lot over the past twenty-four hours about what he could do with the ten rings he'd up until now thought were mere weapons. He couldn't fathom what a boon they might seem like to his ancestor who lived in a time before the Kingdoms with their protective walls, without mechashift weapons, without highly trained hunters.

Even a single ring would have seemed like a miracle that could protect he and his.

What would he do to protect his family. His friends. Pyrrha?

Not that he condoned what the original Star Knight did—if he even did it. After all, he was taking the word of a giant monster.
But he understood if that was the case.

“Look,” he said, holding his hands out defensively again, “I think I'm pretty sure who has your Kin.”

As if he didn't have it before, Jaune was suddenly keenly aware that he had all of Fin Fang Foom's attention. Primal fear crawled up his spine, but he fought it down, awaiting the dragon's response.

He got it not soon after. “Really? Who. Tell me where they are and I will spare you and yours.”

Jaune shook his head. “Sorry, but if you go after her and she's in a populated area, a lot of other people are definitely not going to be spared.” A warning growl made him move immediately to his next point. “B-but—BUT she's an enemy of ours we're trying to stop. We can go after her and when she's defeated, I swear I'll bring your Kin back to you. I know it might not mean a lot to you, but I give you my word as an Arc.”

Foom huffed, a powerful noise coming from him, and narrowed his eyes. “You are correct: that doesn't mean a great deal to me. What is the word of an 'Arc' worth?”

Before Jaune could answer, Nora had flown up beside him. “It's worth as much as the Odindottir's! I stand with him!”

Then Yang stomped up as well. “It's worth me listening to him about this whole 'Kin' thing instead of living out my lifelong dream of punching a dragon.”

“You already punched me.”

Blake, standing on Yang's shoulder, shook her head. “When Yang says 'punch', she never means just once.” Then she lifted her chin. “And I stand by Jaune too. I've seen how far he'll go when it means enough to him.”

Ren, who also hadn't left Yang's shoulder, nodded.

Ruby shot a web line the side of Yang's head and swung herself and Weiss onto her free shoulder. “Yeah! He's my best friend and if he says he's gonna do something, you better believe he's gonna do it.” She looked to Weiss and nodded. Weiss looked back at her blankly, visibly controlling the Grimm essence that wanted more battle.

“Come on Weiss...” Ruby sang.

Rolling her eyes, Weiss finally gave in. “Arc is... reliable. One of the more reliable people I know actually.”

Foom cocked his head. “That does not sound like a ringing endorsement.”

“Oh, you don't know Weiss,” said Ruby with a laugh, “This might be one of the nicest things she's said about anyone.”

While Foom remained unmoved by Ruby's attempt at explanation, Pyrrha flew down to Jaune's level, moving up behind him and placing her hands on his shoulders. “All you truly need to know is that if there is one person in all of Remnant you can trust, it's this man. In the time I've known him, he has never stopped trying to make this world a better place. All of us are here right now because of him.”

The dragon rumbled. “Such impassioned speeches. But the ability to make friends has nothing to
do with how much I can trust him—especially when he bears the symbol of the one who originally tried to steal my Kin.”

“What exactly are you reluctant to risk?” Weiss piped up, feeling much more herself when she had the opportunity to correct someone. “I for one feel like the fight was tipping against your favor before he stopped it: you were taken by surprise and about to be subject to attacks from all quarters. How exactly does stopping your defeat profit him? Is he going to steal the items you don't even have from you with a confidence scam?”

Foom opened his mouth the reply, but Weiss was on a hot streak. “Oh, and let's not forget that he told you where the actual thief is. He trusted—stupidly in my opinion—that you wouldn't run off like a dumb, stupid animal blindly searching for her. Is it too much for him to ask you to give him the same courtesy?!”

That earned her a glare, but after a life living in her family as well as with Blake and Yang, Weiss remained utterly unfazed.

Then she couldn't help herself—she had to give criticism where criticism was due.

“Of course making nice with you is pointless because both you and Jaune have stupidly allowed yourselves to be be played like finely tuned violins in being distractions for each other.” She ignored the looks she got from both dragon and knight. “Look, I've done the math: even if we left now in my ship with the highest quality Dust in the engines, we'll arrive four hours too late to stop Cinder from taking control of Arc Industries, which gives her access to the Arc Network—and if my father's notes are correct, she'll likely have a back door into the local Atlasian Fleet. That's twenty-two ships, nearly a thousand Paladins, countless Knights, plus Arc's own Helios systems and Minerva drones. Thanks to that, she's going to own Vale outright.”

“Not outright,” Jaune said hurriedly. “I made some calls to literally all our friends—went through both my and Pyrrha's contacts for anyone near Vale who can fight. Cinder won't take Vale so easily. It might just buy us enough time to get there, get to the Arc Industries Corporate HQ, and override her orders. Cinder's a lot of things, but she's not a hacker—that's why she needs the actually be made CEO after all.”

Pyrrha nodded. “It's possible with all of us that we can stop things before they get too bad.”

Foom rumbled. “I could easily smash through whatever defenses this city has.”

“I seriously doubt you'd have an easy time with Helios,” said Jaune. “But you're also not exactly fast on your feet or capable of being stowed in the overhead compartment. You wouldn't arrive for weeks, after which time Cinder would have certainly found and unmoth-balled some of my other prototypes—and let's just say I abandoned some of them because of how dangerous they'd be even if used correctly.”

Another rumble. “Hmm. I may have a solution to this problem.” He turned so one giant eye was even with Jaune. “Star Knight! Swear to me—swear on the people who follow you that you will retrieve my Kin and I will can offer you a means of moving anywhere on this world instantly.”

“Wait, seriously? Your people can teleport?” Jaune was trying really hard not to get sidetracked by the science of that.”

“Well no. But mine is not the only ship that has visited this world. I was caught in your gravity well while attempting to investigate one floating inactive in your orbit.”
Jaune sighed, his science-y dreams fading fast. “That's not going to help then. The only tech on Remnant that can leave the atmosphere are my satellites and they can't carry humans. Plus that's eight hours to orbit.”

“You misunderstand, Star Knight. I managed to uplink with this ship. It has beaming technology that can teleport a being from one point on the planet to another. Its energy is limited, but I am certain it could send several humans—not counting the armor you wear.”

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Just because she didn't have all the administrative power of the CEO yet, Cinder was still able to effect things like direct hires, shipping, and driver assignments.

In Vale, it was four in the morning and five new hires were checking in the the Arc Industries depot on the north side of the city.

It wasn't hard to tell that four of them were related: their black, wet dog noses gave that much away. Someone who was up on the criminal underworld of Remnant would have also taken them as a sign that they were from a very specific, prolific and criminal family, the Beagles. And even though there were plenty of female members of the family, they were collectively known in the press as the Beagle Boys.

Braun, Blackie, Bordeaux, and Bleu Beagle, while faunus, weren't part of the White Fang; they were just in it for the money. They wouldn't be part of any of Cinder's plans if she hadn't promised a million yen and a map to a good shelter for when the shit inevitably hit the fan. How and where they were going to spend that lien if the plan went as explained hadn't really struck them yet.

Of course, they were the dumb muscle for this. Adam had insisted a true believer take on the most important part of their mission as well as be the leader.

That's why a ram Faunus named Moss walked ahead of an apart from the others and arrived at the security check-in for the depot carrying a clip board. “Mornin',” he said. The security guard was human and it took a lot of personal strength not to sneer at him.

The guard nodded. He took the clipboard and flipped through the orders. One eyebrow raised as he saw what the invoices were for. “Well damn. Finally getting those things out of the city? I know I'll sleep better knowing they're gone. To say nothing about us finally movin' some weapons. I was worried the company might fold with all this 'no shippin' weapons' thing.”

Moss took the clipboard back with a grunt as the guard opened the security gate for them. “Oh, I totally agree. It's good to see more... right-minded leadership righting this ship. And I can promise you: after today a lot of people are going to be resting a lot easier.”

As he led the Beagle Boys down into the depot's garage, Blu leaned over to Braun and snickered, “Yeah, restin' in peace!”

The Beagles all cackled, but Moss kept his eye on the prize—specifically four silver double-wide trailers parked across the bay and under security lockdown.

RWBYRWBYRWBY

Cinder Fall was in her office early, preparing for the big day and making sure everyone was doing their part.

Mercury and Emerald were waiting for her at her own secure location—they would only get in her
way if Arc somehow managed to send someone to challenge her while she had the rings.

The Valean chapter of the White Fang—those who hadn't been caught up in the disastrous boondoggle in the Emerald Forest—were all in trucks headed out to the Arc compound. After knowing Jaune for years, she had no doubt he'd try to safeguard his inventions once Vale and Beacon fell. So she was going to hit his compound simultaneously with the rest of Vale proper.

Moving to her desk, she put her scroll in the reader slot and called up the data from the program she'd had added to the network upgrade done to the Atlas fleet. Numbers were starting to tick upward as ships, Paladins, and Knights were starting to call home and connect to the Arc Network. Unbeknownst to the Atlasians, they were also granting full remote control to Cinder herself.

Finally, she got up and strode toward her window. A frown crossed her features when as usual, Beacon Academy and the CCTV tower blocked her sight. Her eyes narrowed and she raised her arm, blocking the sight of the school with a black Dust crystal she'd secured to her wrist. It heated and vibrated as she watched.

“Close to waking up, finally? Good. Then everything is going exactly as planned.” A cruel smile split her face. “And this will be the day we waited for.”

Chapter End Notes

Here we go folks, the final arc of Arc Reaction!

Anyone want to guess what Marvel-verse device is going to get some of our heroes back to Vale?

I'm going to call it right now: someone is going to be upset that I made a Beagle Boys reference here, but I don't care. DuckTales is back and awesome and I am so happy with what we've gotten so far even if I hope Mark Beaks never shows up again. When will writers learn that 'trendy' characters are bad medicine?

Once again, I really liked writing Weiss. The idea that her desire to nitpick is more powerful than her inner Grimm is hilarious to me. She also helped me out of a jam here because I couldn't see Foom trusting Jaune until I realized he's got nothing to lose.

Kind of a boring transition chapter, I know, but it had to be done so we can get to awesome.

Oh, and I watched the first episode of Vol 5 and it was pretty good. Some fun parts with Qrow and Nora, Sun and Ghara had a good moment with Kali still being awesome. RNJR is... still kinda doing nothing though. We. Need. Character. Interactions. Talk to each other, damn it.

I feel like this Volume has potential, but at this point so did Vol 4. If they don't screw around too long getting Weiss and Yang linked up with RNJR, this could be really good. I mean, we have a clear goal, a new setting to explore in Mistral—come on guys, you can do this! Forget everything from 3 and 4 and just do some good character writing, dagnabit!

Ahem.
A lot of you are waiting for Shattered Stars, and I'm working on it. It's just that each episode is huge, not the 5 pages I do for the other stories. Please be patient.

Next chapter: our heroes mobilize to battle while the villains' plan goes into action. It's time to see who the best strategist on Remnant really is!
Early morning came to Vale.

Children went to school, adults went off to work, and all the factories and businesses hummed to life.

No one batted an eye at seeing an Arc Industries branded trailer rolling through the streets, nor did they know that the one they saw was one of four slowly and carefully winding its way to a carefully chosen spot somewhere in the city.

One by one they found their way to their designated ready positions: one atop a parking garage in downtown, one in an alley just off the major residential area, another in an office park near the south wall, and the last on the street in the high end commercial district.

There they sat.

And waited.

RWBYRWBYRWBY

Jaune carefully closed the access panel on his personal scroll and pulled it open. After a pregnant pause, the screen lit up, flashing through a highly detailed map of the continent from a satellite's-eye-view. With generations better resolution than anything the Arc Industries satellites could achieve.

Once a split-second review of the land was done, the image was replaced by the words 'Graymalkin Standby'.

“Got it.” he whispered. Then louder, “Got it!”

A lot of held breathes in the Atlas-issued command tent, perched precariously at the edge of the crevasse leading down into Fin Fang Foom's ship, were let out.

“It's about time! It's far past time to fly back now, even with my father's fastest ship.” Weiss said, voice on the edge of worry.

“Sorry it took a few hours to splice my technology into an... I guess alien network. It was weird that the code is all written and commented in our language though. A mystery for when or if I get out of this, I suppose.” He snapped the scroll closed and got to his feet. “There is an issue though.”

“And what's that?” asked Ren. He had stationed himself next to the open side of the ten, taking the task of relaying everything going on inside to Foom. Beside him, observing everything in thoughtful silence was General Ironwood, who had been brought into the team's confidence if only because Jaune felt he deserved an explanation.

Jaune gestured broadly at the group with the scroll. “We weight too much. Or rather, have too much mass. This Graymalkin thing, whatever it really is, is running low on power after being in orbit since before the Great War. So it can only transfer a relatively small amount of mass. Given how most of us are wearing powered armor of some sort and Yang's belt through some Dust
manipulation weirdness alters weight and volume but not mass, that means basically only two of us can go."

“And there’s really no question which two,” Yang said. “You need to go because obviously, and Pyrrha needs to go because she probably knows your business and tech stuff as well or better than you. The rest of us can pile in Weiss’s jet and hope we get there in time not to be useless.

He paused, looking at her appreciatively for a second. “And that sums everything up. Next stop the main Arc Industries campus.”

“Wait, not there.” Jaune paused, giving the speaker, Pyrrha, a curious look. She did a game job not blushing at everyone’s sudden attention. “We need to go to the compound. If it’s just going to be us, we need every advantage and there’s something back at home that might come in handy: the third mode for the Star Knight armor.”

Jaune did an absolutely terrible job in keeping the childlike excitement off his face. “Project Titan?” She nodded. He immediately opened his scroll and started changing coordinate. “You don’t have to tell me twice.”

“Sounds like someone’s getting a new toy. Too bad I won’t be there to see what it does!” said Ruby, looking almost as excited over the prospect of the new armor modification as Jaune was. Then she lunged forward and caught the both of them in a hug. “You guys be safe now, okay? You're two of my very best friends and if anything ever happened to you...”

“Hey,” Jaune rested an armored hand on her head. “None of that kind of talk from you okay? I'm the only one allowed to be snarkily fatalistic.”

Another pair of strong arms joined the group hug. “You obviously haven't spent enough time with Blake.” Yang gave all three of them a squeeze, then looked over to the other half of the former Team RWBY. “Come on over here, you two. Ya might be years out of practice, but you know the drill.” Violet eyes sought out the last two members of the team. “You two too. Come on, bring it in.”

Weiss scoffed, but beat Blake to the huddle. “I suppose I don't really have a choice. Pyrrha, Jaune? Give this Cinder woman hell on the highest order.”

“Try not to die,” added Blake.

“See? Your snarky fatalism is nothing before the downer powers of Blake,” Yang grinned.

Nora barreled into the group, nearly toppling them over. “Fight well, friends! And if you can, save some foes for us!”

Ren just leaned in and patted Nora’s back and Jaune’s shoulder. “We’ll understand if you don't. I'm sure Nora can be satisfied with a small, tasteful bar fight once we get home.”

“It will have to tide me over unless we find some dark einherjaren.” Nora nodded. No one noticed Jaune flinch.

From the back of the tent, Ironwood watched with his arms crossed, his expression unreadable. Yang smirked at him from the knot of armored heroes. “Sure you don't want in on this, General?”

“I'm fine,” said the General. “I just find the bonds of Hunter teams remarkable. And inspiring. Not to mention I'm thinking of ordering ten thousand units of this armor.”
“Not for sale at this moment, sorry to said,” Jaune stood tall as the group hug broke up. “It's in something like permanent beta.” Ironwood only nodded as if he expected as much. “Alright everyone; it's time.”

He turned on the mic to his scroll, then sighed. “You know, once this is over, Arc Industries’ next big project: manned space flight. If only so I can go up to the Graymalkin and change the voice commands.” With on last roll of his eyes, he put one arm around Pyrrha and spoke into the scroll. “Graymalkin: Bodyslide by two to HQ.”

Almost instantly, the couple were ensconced in blinding light which then scattered into millions of thin rays that lanced off in the general direction of Vale and the Arc Compound. When the light was gone, so were Jaune and Pyrrha.

RWBYRWBYRWBY

One of the Beagles was sitting in the control cabin of each trailer. At the appointed time, they each out in headphones and started blasting music as they started running through instructions on how to manipulate the machinery.

Back to the fairy tale, back to the show...

The roofs of the trailers slid open, revealing omnidirectional broadcast towers.

Back to the wall and there’s nowhere to go...

Hydraulic arms lifted the towers vertical and locked into place. They each powered up and began to play a highly specific tone.

Hopeless and Desperate all paths adverse...

And out in the surrounding forests and plains and hills of the Valean countryside, black heads with glowing red eyes snapped around in the direction of Vale. Something was calling them.

Things looking bleak and they’re bound to get worse.

RWBYRWBYRWBY

Scattered light unscattered in the middle of the lab in Jaune's basement, resolving into Jaune and Pyrrha.

“Intruder alert!” Glynda's voice rang out. A klaxon started to wail for a brief moment before cutting off abruptly. “Oh. Welcome home, sir. Your unorthodox means of arrival was unexpected.”

Jaune reluctantly let go of Pyrrha and moved to his primary computer. “You and me both, Glynda. Are we still connected to the Arc Network?”

“In a limited fashion. Your main account was deactivated and logged out of the network at 11:33 last night. However, observational and factory floor accounts remain active.”

Sitting down at the computer, Jaune started typing furiously. “Is the Paragon protocol still in place?”

“There is no evidence that it has been discovered.”

“Perfect.” he pulled open a drawer and after a bit of fumbling, pulled out a flash drive.
“Paragon protocol?” asked Pyrrha, coming to read over his shoulder.

Holding up the drive, Jaune leaned back to smile up at her. “Before your time. I might be stupid about business, but I always knew there was a possibility of the Board replacing me and I couldn't just leave dangerous, important systems under their control. What if some new CEO decided to start charging places for protection against the Grimm? Refused to fire Helios without compensation? Paragon is my emergency reset protocol for the entire Arc Network—kicks everyone off it and reinstates me as the sole admin.”

“I'm guessing you can't do that with a few strokes of the keyboard?”

Jaune winced. “Well I could have if Cinder hadn't booted the Compound out of the network. Now I have to plug this into a computer with admin permission at the main campus. That'd be mine, or Cinder's...”

“Or mine,” Pyrrha finished. “Then the campus is our target. Not that security will be a problem, but if Cinder has the rings... plus I'm fairly sure she's had Hunter training from somewhere...”

“It's going to be a hell of a fight.” Jaune returned the favor, finishing her thought. Then he started typing again. “But that's not the worst part. I was thinking: what could Cinder really accomplish with the Atlasian Fleet in Vale? Air superiority and a few legions of Knight units are a nice little army, but nothing compared to the rest of the Atlas military, plus the Valean reserves, the Hunters and everyone else she's going to piss off. After sacrificing such a huge amount of the White Fang, she would need a whole other army to accomplish anything.”

He pulled up manifests for one of his company's storage facilities and his expression turned to one of loss. “Then I realized the other reason she was so keen on getting my access to the company. What's the single biggest threat of all on the face of Remnant?”

Peering at the screen, Pyrrha went pale as she saw that the four Grimm Lure trailers had been signed out to be moved. “Oh... oh no.”

“Glynda, pull up satellite tracking with primary targetting routines on a fifty mile sweep of the City of Vale,” Jaune said, praying what he was sure was happening wasn't.

“Tasking satellites... collecting and parsing data... warning: six major Grimm hoards detected moving toward Vale. Ground-based sensors stations appear to be unresponsive. Helios systems unresponsive. Minerva launch stations unresponsive. City gate systems offline. Estimated time to arrival of the first hoard: thirty-five minutes. Estimating casualties...”

Jaune manually disabled the computer's voice. “The plan needs to be changed,” he declared, “drastically.” He quickly pulled up a map of Vale, a series of green dots appearing over it. “Everyone I called is in Vale expecting an attack from the inside while the real attack is coming from the outside and in way too huge a volume for them to handle.”

“It wouldn't be a problem if the Arc Network defenses were back online,” Pyrrha pointed out.

“And the Grimm Lures taken out.” Jaune scowled. “I'm faster with the Falcon armor; would be able to take out the four Lure sites first, but we both know going to the campus is going to get Cinder's attention.”

“That's exactly why I should be the one to take care of that part,” Pyrrha insisted.

Jaune shook his head. “No. No way. Pyrrha, Cinder has the rings. She's going to be a force of nature all by herself. Realistically, we probably couldn't take her together—there's no way I can let
you face her alone.”

“Did you expect me to let you do the same?”

He had the decency to look guilty. “From the whole Juggernaut ordeal, we both know I'm a pretty good distraction and evasive target. I can keep Cinder busy long enough for you to destroy the lures and get to me.”

Pyrrha rested a hand on his shoulder. “Cardin didn't have an array of ranged weaponry to shoot you in the back with. Let's be brutally honest, Jaune: you haven't trained enough to really survive even an evasive fight against the kind of firepower we're talking about, let alone engage in a prolonged fight with a fully trained Huntress. It has to be me: I have the armor you built for me and my Semblance, plus more than a decade of training on my side. If there's one of us can hold of Cinder long enough for the other to finish their task, it would be me.”

“I don't like this...” Jaune said, fists clinching.

“You don't have to,” she said earnestly, “But Vale needs us to make the choice with the best chance of saving the most people. You and I both know sending me to the business campus is that best choice.” She leaned down and turned him partly around toward her. “Besides, donning the new module for the Star Knight is going to take ten minutes that I can use to get a head start flying to Vale.”

Turning the rest of the way in his seat, Jaune rose to his feet and took his girlfriend and partner by the arms. “I know you're right, but... Pyrrha, you have no idea what you mean to me; what you have meant to me for so long. If not for you, I probably would have finally fallen apart by now. I certainly wouldn't have gotten the inspiration that let me fly, or fight alongside my friends or stand a chance at saving Vale. And that's on top of everything you've done for me. I love you, Pyrrha Nikos. And I'm not going to lose you. I am going to do everything in my power to deal with lures and get to you. That's a promise—and despite recent events, this Arc is never breaking a promise again.”

“I know you won't Jaune. You're the most wonderful man I've ever know and for as much as you've said I've done for you, you've done as much or more for me. We met because I was hoping for employment, but what I got was the acceptance and companionship I dreamed my whole life for. Thanks to you, I've done and experienced things I've never imagined; learned skills that never would have crossed my mind. I love you too, Jaune. And I'm going to fight with every ounce of strength I have so I'll see you again.”

She brought her arms up around him, and with difficulty thanks to their armor, pulled him into a deep kiss. For a single sublime moment, there was nothing in their world besides one another. Their time together had been brief, but even separated by that armor, they felt an abiding connection of ages.

All too soon, they broke apart, resting for a moment with their foreheads pressed together. Green eyes locked on blue.

“Are you ready?” Pyrrha asked in a whisper.

“No. But whether we're ready or not, Cinder and the Grimm aren't going to wait.”

Pyrrha nodded. “Let's get to work then.” She triggered her helmet to close, her face replaced in his vision by the cold, stern mask of Hematite. “I'll be waiting for you.”
Jaune mirrored the gesture, closing his own helmet. “I'll be there.”

Squaring her shoulders, Pyrrha stepped away and headed off to the wardrobe room to take off.

He watched her briefly before linking his suit to the house's systems. “Glynda, ready Project Titan. Then I need to make a couple of quick calls.” Leaning over his computer console, he started typing, calling up the controls for the various armor racks in the wardrobe. Meanwhile his first call went through.

“Hey. Yeah, I know I normally call your boss instead of you, but I'm in the middle of the highest stakes game of chess ever played and you have a particular set of skills I'm in need of right now. How would you like to earn ten million lien for a couple hours worth of work?”

Chapter End Notes

And here. We. Go.

Graymalkin and the bodyslide technology comes courtesy of the X-men's Cable, who really only matters to me in so far as he's connected to much better character, Deadpool. This will not be the last Deadpool reference in this fic even with maybe four of five chapters total left.

Blake also references the famed battlecry of the Runaways: try not to die.

Also here come the Checkov's guns! Who expected the Grimm Lures to come back?

Really excited for what comes next: Jaune in this fic's final armor and Pyrrha vs Cinder AR style.

Not a whole lot me to say for the author's note. Let's do this folks!
“No, just wait for my signal before you do anything, okay? If Cinder's playing things this deep, I need to make sure she's pulled out every surprise before I pull out mine... and that came out a little dirty. Just wait for my signal okay? Yeah of course I can count on you—you came highly recommended.”

Jaune was rushing around the lab, multitasking by remotely configuring the systems for Project Titan as he talked.

“And yeah, I swear I won't tell anyone. Your secret's as safe with me as it is with Ruby. Thanks again for this. When it's over, all of Vale will thank you.”

With that, he disconnected the call. Project Titan's parts were being readied for integration into the Star Knight armor and all of his adjustments to his plan were in place. Still, he forced himself to keep moving because if he stopped he'd think about Pyrrha on her way to confront Cinder alone. He had to keep moving so he'd be there in time; that he could destroy all the Lures and get to...

And then he did stop. Stopped because he found himself looking toward the wardrobe where the Scarab, the Sentry, and the two previous Hematite versions were all mounted and the experimental armor delivery system lay dormant, awaiting testing.

“Glynda?”

“Yes?”

“Assemble all the armors in the wardrobe and send them to the exact locations of the Grimm Lure trailers.” He left the lab and started up the stairs to the house proper.

“I would point out, sir, that these suits have no pilots and you have yet to develop an AI that can control them.”

“I never said they needed to be piloted or controlled. Drop them on the trailers at maximum velocity. We don't need to defeat anyone; we just need to do enough damage to stop their broadcasting.”

The Household AI warbled. “Proceeding as directed, Mr. Arc. However a new complication has arisen. A large number of vehicles including a tractor trailer just passed the five mile marker on the road to the compound. They're approaching at a high rate of speed.”

Jaune increased his pace up the stairs. “Shit. Seal every entrance by the front door and the fabrication shed. When I leave the house, seal the front doors and put every building but the fabrication shed into Code Damocles lockdown. Sounds like Cinder's not resting on her laurels and I'm not going to allow her to take anything I've made here.”

Emerging in the living room, he started to make a beeline for the door but stopped at the mantle. He was wearing Crocea Mors attached to the Star Knight, but the plaque was still there bearing the family creed:

I am a child of House Arc.
The Blood of Kings and Queens roars in these veins.
By the jaundiced edge of this blade, we hewed a Kingdom from the Darkness
I stand. I live to push that Darkness back.
I stand. I live as a Guardian of Mankind.
Those behind my Aegis will never perish from this world.
Such is the Word of House Arc.
Such is the Will of the Dust and Remnant.

When he'd been young, those words had inspired him, filling his head with ideas of a grand heroic destiny.

After his falling out with his family, he's tried to force himself to look upon it with scorn despite his deep desire to still chase those dreams.

And now here he was: A child of House Arc, heading out to push the darkness back, to be a guardian of the people of Vale, sheltering them behind his Aegis—not just his family shield, but the defenses he'd spent his life inventing and developing.

He no longer had to believe in the family creed: he was living it.

Time being of the essence, he didn't linger any longer, making his way out the door and out onto the lawn of the Compound.

It made him feel a little ashamed that he'd never really taken time to enjoy the little piece of a forsaken world he'd carved out for himself. Behind the walls and Helios defenses, the compound sat on three acres of lightly wooded land with the drive snaking through trees and the various outbuildings like the fabrication shed and supply warehouse tastefully concealed by the same.

Maybe if he hadn't been so blind both to it's wonders and what had clearly been brewing between himself and Pyrrha they might have enjoyed leisurely sunset strolls and picnic lunches there. Now Cinder's forces would descend upon it in a matter of minutes and the Damocles protocols might be forced to demolish all of it. And as for Pyrrha...

He couldn't help it. As he bolted toward the fabrication shed, he opened his comm. “I'm heading for the shed now. Where are you?”

“Just entering Vale's airspace, about seven minutes from Arc Industries main campus.” After a slight pause, she added, “Keep the comm open. I want to hear your reaction to Project Titan.”

“It's that epic, huh?” Ahead, Jaune could now see the delivery doors to the shed; two story tall metal shutters which Glynda was currently raising for him so he wouldn't have to go around to the normal entrance.

“I think you'll be pleasantly surprised,” Pyrrha laughed.

Jaune ducked under the rising door. “You sound really confident... whoa.”

Over the past weeks, he'd become very good at estimating what disassembled powered armor would look like when assembled around the wearer. Project Titan would stand just under twelve feet tall, nearly doubling his height.

And was Yang would say, it had all the weapons: a pair of shoulder-mounted experimental miniaturized Helios units with under-slung miniguns; six repulsers on the fists with five more in the palms—and eight in each foot; back-mounted missile racks and... well he couldn't call it a unibeam because he counted five arc reactors inside the chest plate. The whole thing was hunter green with
lighter panels for contrast and brilliant silver tracery extending across its surface.

“And you gave me a hard time about my overbuilding?”

Pyrrha laughed again. “Well in my defense, it isn't designed to be your primary armor, but something to bring out in emergencies—like this one. But the irony wasn't missed on me. That's why I named it after what I called the Sentry when you first showed it off. Jaune Arc, meet The Hulk.”

“Incredible,” he murmured.

“You don't know the half of it,” Pyrrha laughed, “Remember that Dust sample your sister's partner gave us? I had Weiss do analysis and then asked Renard to rush deliver more from the Wakandan mounds. The Wakandan Dust, Vibranium is amazing. When allowed with the titanium alloy we use in the suits, it becomes lighter and nearly indestructible. Weiss calls it Adamantium. But then there's the properties of the Dust itself: it transforms emotional energy into a kinetic field similar to what Cardin was able to do as the Juggernaut.”

“Emotional energy?” Jaune stepped onto the platform below the armor where it would be assembled around him and started to process. The platform raised into the midst of the various parts of the Hulk and robotic arms began connecting parts of an exoframe to the Star Knight suit. “I'm not quite follow...”

A squawk in the comms interrupted him and Glynda reported in. “The caravan of vehicles is less then one minute from the gates, sir. The lead vehicle shows no signs of slowing down.”

“What was that?”

“Nothing important,” said Jaune and the arms locked the exoframe into place and lowered the chestplate onto it. “Cinder sent someone to make sure we didn't interfere, but I'm already armoring up—they're too late. Just get to Arc Industries and I'll see you soon.”

Moss, the ram faunus who accompanied the beagles to the Arc industries depot, stomped the accelerator of the tractor trailer he'd taken from there. The heavy vehicle leapt far ahead of the assortment of cars, vans, trucks and a single minibus the ragtag group of White Fang members he'd been able to muster were driving.

Cinder had ordered him to go all-hands on deck since most of their fighters and all of their Aura users in Vale had been arrested. That meant he was leading not soldiers but researchers, propagandists, guards, custodians and every other support person that previously kept the Fang in Vale running. One last chance at striking a real blow.

The last Fang commander in Vale, Moss wished he could have reported to Sienna Khan herself what was going on. How Taurus had taken his eyes off the prize and nearly decimated their Vale operations by throwing in with Cinder Fall. How they seriously needed to regroup and rethink things before they lost it all.

But in truth, he didn't because like it or not, Taurus was still his superior (even if he'd abandoned their operation to take over the cells in Vacuo) and try as he might, Moss always went along with the herd.

So instead, he focused on what he was trying to accomplish. He wasn't doing this for Taurus, but all the faunus children who needed to grow up in a world where they got equal pay for equal work,
where they weren't harassed and called inferior, where they weren't marginalized and threatened.

With that in mind, he gripped the wheel as the heavy gates of the Arc Compound came into view.

Arc was a liar, he was sure of it. He'd gotten a little shaken from his kidnapping and promised the world in hopes of avoiding another incident. Eventually he'd go back to doing what every other company was doing and ignoring or even causing the suffering of the faunus.

When he was sure the truck would hit its mark without him, he threw open the door and hurled himself out. The world became a kaleidoscope of light color and pain as he rolled through grass and brush. He hadn't even finished when the truck struck the gate and its upload of explosives went off.

In the fractions of a second before the shockwave hit him and knocked him unconscious, he wondered if this time—unlike all the other attacks, kidnappings and threats—they might make a difference.

RWBYRWBYRWBY

“I'll see you soo--” The comm crackled violently and cut out.

“Jaune?” Pyrrha paused, hovering in air, her voice laced with horror. “Jaune? Answer me!”

A warble sounded in here ear and Glynda's voice spoke. “You are out of range of direct radio communication and the compound's miniature CCT is no longer responding.”

“Give me the satellite link.”

“Unable to sign in to satellite array. The login: goddessofvictory02 or the password are no longer valid.”

Pyrrha cursed Cinder, turning to look back in the direction of the compound. There was a distinct pillar of smoke on the horizon. She wanted nothing more than to push her suit to the limit going back there and making sure Jaune was okay.

But she had a greater responsibility here and she had to trust him to take care of himself while she did her job.

It was with great reluctance and an aching heart that she turned away from the distant sigh of her home and possibly love burning and powered on toward her goal.

On the way, no traveling in silence, she was left to ponder her actual plan of attack. In theory, she could walk right in the front door. It was unlikely that Cinder had managed to stack the entire front office with her allies and everyone knew and like Pyrrha there. It would raise less of an alarm.

Or it could do the opposite if Cinder had someone watching. And she'd have to fight her way up to the executive suite with friends and coworkers in danger of becoming collateral damage.

Alternatively, she could just fly right through the window of Jaune's office. It would set off every alarm in the building, but she really only needed a few seconds to plug in the flash drive and then play distraction while It did its work.

It was the second plan that won out by virtue of putting less people in harm's way.

“Alright Jaune, you had better be ready to act once you get access again,” she muttered, arrowing
toward the central twenty-story tower of the Arc Industries HQ. “And you'd better still be alive.”

She hit the window at a conservative fifty miles an hour and used both rolling and the deployment of repulsers to come to a stop before doing any damage to the furniture and equipment inside. While a smash-and-grab wasn't her preferred method of doing things, she would have been laying to say it hadn't given her a little thrill.

Quickly pulling herself together, she straightened up from the crouch she'd landed in and took a deep breath...

... and was immediately hit in the back by a blast that hurled her across the room the crater into the far wall. Flames washed around her to darken crack and peel the paint.

Staggered, she turned to find Cinder Fall sitting in Jaune's executive chair with her feet up on the desk. There was a magazine on her lap and one hand held half a glass of wine while the other aimed a fistful of rings, one of which was glowing red. Then the one on the pinky of the same hand flared a glacial blue and Pyrrha found her chest cocooned in layers of frost that stuck her to the wall.

Even as she did this, Cinder's cruel smirk collapsed into a sullen glower. “Oh. It's you.” As if sensing the confusion Pyrrha was feeling, she set the wine glass down and elaborated. “I expected if one of you was going to come crashing through my window, it'd have been Arc. Looks like his brand of stupid rubbed off on you.”

Pyrrha's only response was the strain against the frost. Cracks started to form in the ice as it failed against the combined strength of the Hematite and Pyrrha's armor.

Taking this as her cue to speed things along, Cinder kicked her legs off the desk and stood up. “You're just lucky I'm saving the disintegration beam for him.” Extending her arms out to the sides, she focused her Semblance to pull crushed glass discreetly concealed in her clothing and construct it into a pair of scimitars.

The ice finally gave way, shattering into glittering shards. In lieu of firing repulsers into the room and risking harming the computer she needed to plug the flash drive into, Pyrrha drew Hanashitte and Kiku from her back. She lunged to meet Cinder in a clash of blades vs spear.

“Why are you doing any of this? What did the people of this city do to deserve this?”

Cinder raised an eyebrow as the two traded attack and counter at high speed. “Oh so you figured it out! Impressive—but not enough to make up for what a crushing disappointment you are.”

It wasn't enough to make Pyrrha drop her guard against the duel scything attack Cinder launched at her ribs. She turned one aside with Kiku and force Cinder to withdraw on the other side with a feint with Hanashite.

Pressing on with her taunt, Cinder continued. “You know what the sad thing is? I thought I could have brought you over to our side. You know, once you killed Arc.”

She sidestepped a shield bash and racked her swords across Pyrrha's torso. Between the armor and her aura, they did little more than scratch the finish, but now Cinder was inside her guard, and the rings started to glow...

...only for the featureless mask of the Hematite armor make contact with her forehead. Aura was all well and good, but a surprise shot to the head was still disorienting. Pyrrha followed up by bringing her shield back across her chest, then slammed Cinder hard enough to drive her back several steps.
“What reason would I ever have had to kill him?”

“Dust, so many!” Cinder replied viciously, sending alternating fiery and concussive blasts from her rings. “You were a nobody that used to be a somebody forced to play nursemaid for the man who was making your kind obsolete. Someone who compared to you is a pathetic; a drunken, lecherous fool with absolutely disdainful proclivities.”

She paused in her assault—against which Pyrrha had turtled behind her shield—and smirk devilishly. “Oh. Wait. I made that last one up for the press so he'd never get a chance to form a meaningful romantic relationship and keep working. Oh, I had many important plans for Jaune Arc—UNTIL YOU RUINED IT! A thousand reasons to kill him and you couldn't find one!”

Her frustration culminated in another charge with the scimitars, which Pyrrha caught on her shield, but didn't push away. Instead, she pivoted and let the blade slide off to the side. In the process, she revealed that she'd been charging her unibeams and maneuvering Cinder away from the computer on Jaune's desk.

A blast of blue-white light slammed Cinder in the chest, sending her flying across the room to crash through the double doors to the waiting room outside where she then struck and rendered into kindling the rarely-occupied receptionists' desk.

Mecha-shifting Hanashitte into its plasma cannon mode, Pyrrha stood proud. “I was never a nobody and I never wanted to be a somebody. The life I have now—well if you're the reason for it happening, I'll thank you for it from the bottom of my heart. But your plans end here.”

Cinder rolled to a crouch, splinted falling from her body. She'd lost her weapons in the process, but brandished the rings on her left hand; the one on her thumb glowing white. “Oh really?”

Caught off guard at last, Pyrrha was off balance when her weight increased tenfold and she fell, the impact shaking the room.

With a victorious glint in her eye, Cinder rose to her feet. “On the contrary, Nikos, they're just beginning.”

Chapter End Notes

Finale fight one has begun!

Don't worry folks, we get to see Jaune in the Hulk next time, but I had to kick off Cinder vs Pyrrha early because it's a multi-stage fight with a lot of points I've been building all series to get to. Hell, this fight is WHY I wrote this. Remember I started this thing almost directly after seeing the end of Volume 3.

There's not a lot of references or funny bits in this one, just a lot of high emotion, so I don't have a lot to say right here. I just hope you all enjoy reading it as much as I love writing it.
A battalion of ragtag White Fang troops rolled over the churned earth where once had stood the gates to the Arc Compound.

Every member of the Fang left in Vale and its surrounding villages had come. These were not the elite, those with unlocked auras or Dust. They were the rank and file, armed with whatever weapons they could grab and sent to fight a foe they knew for a fact outgunned them by an order of magnitude.

But a million ants can strip the bones of an elephant clean.

Over three hundred men, women and even children had come to strike a blow for faunus rights against a human they were told offered the world with one hand while holding the same lash as the Scnhee in the other. After all, hadn't Jaune Arc flown to the aid of human supremacists against Adam Taurus?

And so they broke into groups and trooped through the wooded, park-like interior of the compound.

The main group; the best armed and most experienced fighters, headed for the main house which they assumed would obviously the best defended. The others; the young, the elderly and infirm or even just those with no weapons to speak of, were directed to the outbuildings.

Which is how it came to be that a mixed crew of young teens and old men and women found themselves shambling in an awkward squad formation up the concrete main path toward the full scale fabrication shed.

Perhaps if they'd know that's what the featureless concrete block of a building with a hangar-style shutter entrance was, they might have decided to send some stronger warriors.

In retrospect for everyone, that might have been for the best.

As the group approached, they became aware of, of all things, music. Sharp, rough electric guitar licks that sounded like some feral beast scratching its way out of a sheet metal box. There was a chunk sound and the shutter started to rise.

You take a mortal man.

Calm, growling lyrics spilled out from under the rising door. The Fang irregulars stumbled and rushed to cover in the foliage on the side of the path.

Most of them at least. One girl who couldn't have been more then thirteen froze. Her hands quivered as she struggled to raise the old, rusted revolver toward the threat behind the door. Her woolly sheep's ears dropped in terror.

And put him in control.

Like a rising curtain, the rising door slowly revealed a jade giant. Almost as large if not larger than an Atlassian Paladin, the powered armor bristled with more weaponry than the White Fang had even
brought to the compound.

Watch him become a god.

The panic fire was immediate. Shots struck the armor en masse, but they didn't even ricochet. They simply struck the strange, glowing green lines on the armor and simply... fell off as if they'd lost all momentum.

Watch people's heads a'roll. A'roll, a' roll!

Not everyone in the little group was poorly armed, however.

For example, one man, whose now-white hair had once been a luxurious and quite leonine mane, had held on to a single-use rocket launcher his father had brought home from the Great War. “For the Faunus!” He screamed as loudly as his raspy voice could manage.

Then he fired.

Inside the Hulk armor, it didn't take a genius to realize that the blast radius of said rocket would catch the still-petrified lamb girl. He knew immediately what he had to do.

The repulser banks in the Hulk's feet activate on low blast, allowing the titanic machine to skate along the ground with surprising speed for its size. Jaune had to make a herculean effort to ignore the screams of the girl as he skirted around her and dropped to a knee with his back to the incoming rocket, his massive armored frame completely blocking her as the weapon exploded against it.

Concrete cracked and chunks were sent flying in all directions, but the vibranium Dust absorbed the shockwave that otherwise would have liquefied the girl's organs.

Jaune cut his music and, as the din and roar of the rocket faded, looked down, checking the girl for injuries with the Hulk's sensors. “Are you okay?”

She looked up at him, disbelieving at what she was seeing.

“If you can make that face, you're okay.” Jaune decided aloud. Then he stood up and turned toward the man with the now-empty rocket tube. The other members of the White Fang had stopped firing in order to take cover from the explosion, but now some of them were back to training weapons on the Hulk.

“What were you thinking?!” Jaune demanded. With his mounting anger made the vibranium glow brighter. “You could have killed her! And for what? Has anything you've seen or heard of me made you think I couldn't tank a what—seventy-year old rocket? Pro-tip: If you want people to think you're on the right side of history, try exploding fewer little girls.”

Silence had fallen over the path as the gathered faunus had no reply for that. They couldn't even bring themselves to fire on their hated enemy.

Jaune huffed. “I don't have time to for this. Vale is under attack. All of Vale. The people Adam Taurus sold your cause out to are sending a horde of Grimm the likes of which the world's never seen. Grimm don't care what kind of ears you have or whether you've got horns or a tail.”

Carefully stepping around the faunus girl, he strode off toward the forest. “No more speechifying. Just go warn your friends that the lab will self destruct if they manage to breech it. Let's try to keep the bloodshed to a minimum—there's going to be way too much of it already today.”
He didn't hear what if any reaction they had, just kept walking. Frankly, he didn't much care what they thought in the moment. The world was falling apart, everyone he cared about—as well as the rest of an entire city—were in danger, and he didn't have time to argue with fanatics.

Despite what he'd said, the Damocles directive would demolish the interior of the house before anyone got inside. No one would die form it; it was just his last ditch effort not to lose his home on top of everything else.

But he really was needed elsewhere. Calling up the list of tourtorials Pyrrha had helpfully left him, he searched for the flight system that had so far eluded him.

He was greeted by Pyrrha's voice, but not her usual cadence. At some point, she'd used the same voice capture program he'd used to give computer-Glynda Professor Glynda's voice. It sounded like the person, but the fact that it strung syllables together to create words still gave off a stilted, unnatural feel. Hearing Pyrrha sounding like that made him shiver a little.

"The Hulk is actually too heavy for real, sustained flight. But I think you'll enjoy the alternative." A mini screen flashed up in front of him showing a ballistic trajectory, alongside another showing controls for the foot and leg-mounted repulsers. "That's right: it's the super-jump you wanted—only significantly scaled up. You might notice that your seat is infused with Vibranium. That's so you survive the G-forces."

Jaune felt himself starting to grin just a little as Pyrrha's voice went on to explain how to execute the jump.

Moments later, the Hulk was in a full-out sprint across the compound. Panels in the legs opened to extend racks of repulsor arrays as those on the feet started to power up to full.

Several White Fang troops spotted the green giant and tried to give chase only to be bowled over when over three dozen repulsor banks fired as one, leaving an expanding ring of blue repulsor energy that uprooted small trees and blasted the larger ones into so much kindling.

Jaune found himself several hundred feet skyward arcing gracefully toward Vale. The view would have been breathtaking under normal circumstances: Vale was surrounded by lush grassland and rolling hills on one side and majestic foothills and mountains on the other with the twin forests of Forever Fall and Emerald flanking it.

But at the moment, green was marred by black scars of tens of thousand of Grimm bodies tearing across the terrain in all directions as the monsters crawled, skittered and thundered their way toward the city, heeding the call of the Grimm lures.

Directing his sensors toward Vale, hoping against hope and found exactly what he feared. The Atlasian fleet that had come to Vale for retrofitting wasn't responding and neither were the Arc Industries Helios units nor the Minerva drones. Worse, the gates were wide open and the Grimm horde nearest him was only about a mile out.

Mighty though the Hulk's jumping prowess was (it looked like he would cover more than half the ten mile span between the Compound and Vale once he landed), the repulsor banks needed to recharge for a short time between leaps. Time that the Grimm could use to reach the gates.

That wasn't something he was about to remotely let happen. Luckily, the Hulk came with more weapons than an Atlasian battalion. With a gesture, Jaune called up a carousel-style menu of all vast arsenal at his disposal. Another gesture selected and armed a complement of missiles equivalent to half a Jericho missile's loadout.
Four panels along the Hulk's back opened and belched forth a torrent of missiles that corrected in-air to rain down among the Grimm, blasting them apart by the dozens and churning up the ground under their feet in a bedlam of fire, smoke and dissolving black miasma.

The younger Grimm didn't even stop running. Driven by naught but instinctual hatred and a drive to seek out negative emotions, many more were annihilated simply by charging headlong into debris and shrapnel. Many more simply continued on toward Vale, relentless.

Among them, however were older things; more intelligent and deadly than their brethren. These realized that something dangerous had attacked the horde from behind—something that needed to be dealt with. They turned, going against the tide of more numerous but less intelligent Grimm to face whatever it was.

For one unfortunate giant creep, said danger was the last thing it ever saw as four tones of adamantium and protective fury landed on it with both feet. The creature exploded into a cloud of dark miasma, obscuring what hit it from the other creatures with it.

Wisdom made them shy back instead of rushing in.

That... was a mistake.

Grinding music stared booming out of the cloud and through the inky darkness, they saw lines of emerald light. Then a hulking shape surged forward.

Just like the pied piper

A Berengal Silverback had no time to react before a jade fist punched its head clean off its shoulders.

Not wanting to be next, a Beowolf Alpha led its pack to try and jump the assailant from behind. It was met by a pair of over-sized assault shotguns to snap around, track them with accuracy only an AI was capable of, and blasted the entire pack to so much smoke and ash in a series of staccato booms.

Led rats through the streets

Two giant Creeps and an Elder Deathstalker charged him; the scorpion Grimm from the front while the Creeps flanked.

The Hulk stepped into the path of the Deathstalker's claw strike and caught it on a Vibranium-infused forearm. Then he grasped said claw, twisted, and ripped it off before hurling it into the face of one of the Creeps. Pivoting, he caught the other creep by the sides of its head and swung it around to shield him from the Deathstalker's stinger.

Dance like marionettes

Seconds later, the Creep jerked as the stinger entered its gut. When it started disintegrating, Jaune took the opportunity to thrust his arms through the smoke and grab the stinger itself. Hauling hard, he whipped the monster up off the ground and into the head of a rapidly-approaching King Taijutsu.

The snake's other head hissed and lashed forward only to be hammered into the ground with the body of the still-struggling Deathstalker. A blast from a the repulser banks in the Hulk's left palm finished them both off.
Jean turned to face the worst of the elder horde: a trio of Goliaths.

Again, he didn't have time for this: the lesser Grimm were still bearing down on Vale's open gates. The two miniaturized Helios units spat golden-yellow beams and raked the legs of the lead beast. A full-sized Helios would have annihilated the creature, but the compact, mobile version still cut the monster off at its front knees.

Trumpeting in panic born of only of its advanced age and intellect, the Grimm crumpled to the ground, desperately trying to rise on legs that were no longer there.

Swaying to the Symphony...

The other two Goliaths were not about to let the crippling of their brother go lightly. They trumpeted fury and stomped around the fallen one to get at Jaune.

Jaune, in the Hulk, stood firm. “Divert all excess power to chest RT.” He threw his arms wide and the chest plate of the armor opened to reveal that the suit was power by now one, not three, but five miniaturized arc reactors. Pyrrha's comments in the schematics joked that he would call it the 'penta-beam', but right now, he called it just right for the situation.

The blazing blue beam exploded out into a veritable wind of repulser energy. The elephanteine Grimm were stymied in their forward motion, slowing until it was all they could do to keep from being pushed back. Then their bodies started to come apart, splintering, cracking, and evaporating until there was no more strength left in them to fight and they were literally blown away.

Swaying to the Symphony...

To follow it up, Jaune took off again, running up the trunk of the immobilized Goliath. From the hump of its back, he vaulted into the air. The repulser banks in the hands and arms of the Hulk realigned as he came down, and in the process, brought his hands together as if he were clapping.

He landed in the midst of the lesser Grimm and the repulsers fired as one, their energy rebounding off one another again and again, redoubling until they became a mighty shockwave that annihilated swathes of Grimm and overturned the earth beneath scores of other, burying them in rock and dirt.

Of Destruction!

The horde bearing down on the gate had been reduced to scattered stragglers and a few elder Grimm that, despite the Grimm Lure, were starting to rethink their attack.

Jaune, however, had eyes only for the gate. With ground-eating tread, he barged toward the locked-open gate and fired his foot-mounted repulsers to jump up to it. The raw weight of the Hulk made the motors in the portcullis grind. Then he reached up with one hand and pushed with every ounce of strength gifted him by the suit.

With a terrible din, the motors were ripped form their housing and the the Hulk rode the gate down until it crashed into place, denying the Grimm access.

Giving the amazed Hunters on the wall a thumbs up, he turned his attention to other more pressing matters.

“Gate control and the defenses are still down. That means... Glynda, find me a comm to Pyrrha right now.”

“Easier said than done, sir. Emergency channels are flooded with the news of the Grimm attach
and the failure of the defenses to activate. Strategic channels are similarly jammed with Hunter traffic and the Vale police.”

Jaune grit his teeth. “Then hack the Vale CCT. Piggyback on SHIELD’s comms. Do whatever it takes, just get me in touch with her!”

“Wouldn't it be a more efficient use of time and resources to contact P—”

“If Pyrrha hasn't finished her mission, then that means Cinder has someone or something that can take her on. I'm not revealing my ace until I'm confident Cinder's revealed hers. And the one who can tell me what's going on there is...?”

“Is that really the reason you want to contact Miss Nikos?”

To busy himself, and because he'd interrupted the jump repulsers' recharge cycle bringing down the gate, Jaune started climbing the wall. “I didn't program you to be my therapist. I programmed you to be my assistant. Now assist me.”

Despite the suit doing all the work, Jaune felt himself huffing nonetheless. “Besides, I've made certain the rest of Vale has backup. But no one else is on the way to back Pyrrha up.”

There were those would would describe Cinder Fall as beautiful.

But in the harsh light of the white ring, her features were thrown into harsh, predatory relief; the mad glint in her eyes a veritable star shining in the night. Towering over Pyrrha, who seemed to only just be able to keep on one knee under the gravitational assault, she sneered like a cat playing with its dinner.

“Before you go, I'm going to impart some wisdom. Do you know why I thought you might come around to our way of thinking?”

“Because you thought I might be a sociopath?” The effort to breath and talk was evident even through the distortion the Hematite helmet provided.

Ignoring the barb, Cinder just kept talking. “In this world where there is an entire class of people necessary to fight monsters, you got put on a pedestal—because of how good you were beating the Aura out of your fellow humans. And then when you decided to fight those monsters instead? They forgot about you.

“This world is rotten to the core; the people in it savage, selfish beasts that need to be culled. Search your feelings: you know it to be true.”

Pyrrha took a few more deep breaths. The heels of her armored boots had splintered right through the concrete under the carpet and she knew for a fact that one false move would allow the weight of the armor to crush her. Only her shield, braced against her right side was keeping her from total collapse. “Thank you for your wisdom, Cinder. In return, I'll tell you something.”

One dark eyebrow rose. “Is this going to be one of those cliched heroic speeches in defiance? Don't bother if you're just going to bore me.”

“Nothing like that,” Pyrrha wheezed. “Just something about me. Do you know how some Semblances are passed down through family lines?”
“What does this have to do with anything?”

“My family is like that,” Pyrrha continued, undaunted. “I inherited my Semblance from my mother.”

Cinder rolled her eyes. “Are we going somewhere with this?”

“Only... the family Semblance isn't Polarity. It's more of a theme.” Pyrrha seemed to lose her battle with intense gravity, slowly shifting to the right as her shield slipped from where she's planted it. “Universal Forces.” The collapse turned into a roll as she let herself land on her shield and used it as a fulcrum. Weight turned into momentum and she found herself rolling out of the circle of white energy that marked the gravity well.

Coming up with incredible speed, she hurled her shield, bouncing it off the wrist of the hand with the white ring and from there straight into Cinder's face.

“I've been training in high gravity since I was seven!” She didn't press the advantage. Instead, she used Cinder's distraction to produce the data stick Jaune have given her and use her Semblance to guide it into the computer.

A progress bar flashed up on her HUD. 'Paragon protocols uploading. Estimated time to completion: five minutes.'

Five minutes. That's all he time she needed to buy to Vale.

With that in mind, she returned her attention to Cinder... And froze in the face of an intense purple light from the ring on Cinder's left ring finger. All thought of attack, of saving Vale, of... anything... ebbed away.

Fury burned in Cinder's eyes and she practically roared as she spoke. “I was going to kill you quick. Just an arrow to the heart and that would have been it. But now? Now I'm going to make you suffer, Nikos. Kneel.” The power of the ring made her voice reverberate into every cell of Pyrrha's body and despite herself, she felt herself returning once more to a knee.

Cinder grinned a murderous grin. “Face the window.”

Pyrrha turned despite herself. The window out of Jaune's office afforded an unrivaled view of Vale —and Beacon Academy on the cliffs above.

“So many students there. So fresh, so young and full of determination to save this forsaken world. Some of them are fans, I'm sure. They're only there because they believed in you. Oh, and then there's Arc's sister. Is she back there by now? I'll be sure to look. Maybe I'll kill her last. Watch.”

“I'm not just going to sit here and let you get away with this,” Pyrrha struggled to stand from kneeling, finding that he body just... wouldn't.

Cinder knelt beside her, looping on hand over her shoulder while the other practically pressed the ring against Pyrrha's helmet. “Shh. Shh. Of course you will. Just one more order. You'll see. You'll see.” Leaning in close, making sure she had the same view of Beacon as her victim, Cinder spoke two more words. Give. Up.”

Chapter End Notes
HULK SMASH!

God there was a lot in this one.

So, obviously, Hulk. I hope it was worth the wait.

I originally planned to have Jaune run roughshod over the White Fang, but I feel like this way shows more of his character in still wanting to help these people.

Setting this whole thing to Symphony of Destruction just came from my phone playing that once a day for the last week. I think it's really fitting though, seeing as this is Jaune's ascension into a full on powerhouse.

Pyrrha gets the short end of the stick the last two chapters. I hope I at least gave her a badass moment to make up for it. But really, this arc is about Jaune. She'll her her time to shine in the sequel. And in the next chapter, but EVERYONE gets their time to shine.

This fic is not long for this world, folks! Hope you're enjoying the ride!

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