

Yo, so here is the next episode of Semblance of Hope. Here we see more than a few things going on in the background elsewhere, and Ranma and Co's journey through the Spartoi Valley.

Work has begun on the *Magic of the Force* chapter. I'm done with the combat scenes and one minor romance scene. I also, for some reason because I had trouble getting back into it (gee, I wonder why) wrote up outlines for the next DA episode and ATP. The next chapter will be around 25,000 words, and I might not be able to get out the *DA* episode by the end of the month. I should have it off to *Tomon* for editing by the 1st or 2nd though. Sorry, forgot to think about family time during Thanksgiving LOL. Losing a day and a half will sink my ability to get both *Magic* and *DA* done in time.

This has been edited by *Tomon*.

Episode 6, Chapter 21: Into the Wilds

While Ranma and the others had been traveling upriver, events elsewhere had continued. Tests were given, plans for parties made, a certain criminal twosome started to reclaim their freedom and their place at the top of the local hierarchy. And elsewhere, a trail was discovered and followed to a new prey in Atlas...

"We found him," Ironwood announced over the scroll, gesturing over his shoulder, and tilting his scroll so that the other man could see behind where Ironwood was standing, enough to see the wreckage of a laboratory somewhere, including two Atlesian Paladins, numerous combat droids, computers, and one unconscious, seemingly middle-aged man with a dapper coat and a mustache. A man that was quite well known in political and intellectual circles. A man who was supposed to be dead, but apparently that had been grossly overstated as the trail of the stolen Atlesian weapons had led to this man.

Best not to ever mention to Ironwood where I received some of the information on that money and material trail. He wouldn't appreciate it, nor would Torchwick and his tiny and terrifying associate.

"Arthur Watts..." Ozpin murmured instead of giving those thoughts voice, staring at the unconscious man. "Well now, I believe that we have much to talk about, General. Please, bring him to Beacon. I am most interested to see what he has to say. And if you could, do so without all four nations knowing you're doing it?"

James snorted, in a good mood for once, nodding firmly. "Agreed. With this, we can crack this whole Salem Conspiracy wide open."

"All the while Salem is too busy concentrating on the Azure Warden to plot against us effectively. The Knight's Gambit indeed," Ozpin murmured, cutting the connection as he idly

wondered about that aspect of things. “Hmm... I wonder if the Knight would like some help from the bishops... Best to try and contact Lionheart once more, but clandestinely...”

OOOOOO

While the humans might have put weight on their wall and its anti-air defenses, the real defense of valleys like Nike was the same now as it had been for centuries: the mountains that surrounded them. After leaving the walls behind, the incline rose steadily steeper, except for one point that looked as if it had been damaged by a rockslide, the rockslide itself being at the bottom of a seemingly far less steep crevice leading further through the mountains. Or rather, what looked like the bottom of the crevice. Closer, it was obvious the crevice actually went in a different direction up top, and that this rockslide had broken what must have been a thin wall of rock between the outer edge of the mountain and the crevice before.

That wall of rock had been replaced by a tall wall made of stone, concrete and steel, reminding Ranma of the more formidable defenses found defending the larger valleys. It was also several times thicker, and knowing what to look for, Ranma also saw a few motion sensors there.

At the foot of the wall Pyrrha paused, slowing her run as the others did the same. Jaune was breathing deeply but seemed well enough, while Ren was gasping, and grateful for a break. Despite most of the personalized training he'd gotten on the ship to Mistral, Ren still lacked physical and Aura endurance.

Ranma looked back over his shoulder from where he and Nora had been racing one another climbing up the wall, which sitting at the top of the rockslide was about eight stories tall. But seeing Pyrrha's expression, he paused, then ordered, “Nora, keep on going. Take a look at the crevice and then hook up a climbing rope for the others. I'll be right back.”

Pouting, Nora was going to protest this, hanging from her fingernails like it was an everyday occurrence, even raising one hand to waggle a finger admonishingly at Ranma for making her do all the work. Then she saw Ren and Jaune below, resting, and Pyrrha's body language. She just nodded, then asked, “You think if I see any Grimm I can kill 'em here?”

“I don't think so. I ain't ever been around here, so I don't know how many Grimm there could be, but one thing I do know is that loud sounds and explosions in the mountains are not a good thing. What do you think created the need for this wall in the first place?” Ranma explained, causing Nora to scowl, but continue her way upwards without further argument. The ginger-haired girl's physical strength was immense, and despite acting like an ADHD kid on a sugar high most of the time, she had excellent body control and knew how to climb pretty darn well.

With that taken care of, Ranma hopped back down the wall, slowing himself down only once before hitting the ground with a thump, his knees bending under the impact. Then he was by his girlfriend, one hand reaching out to gently touch Pyrrha's shoulder. "Hey, you okay?"

"I... this is where the Hydra came down into the valley. We don't know how, but it was in the crevice above, and then just came down the same rockslide we've been following to this point, and..." Pyrrha fell silent, but remembering the tale of her grandfather and having seen the signs of the damage done to the valley, Ranma didn't need to be told anything else.

He pulled her into a light hug, saying nothing more for a moment, not having the words to take Pyrrha's pain away. This though seemed enough, as after a moment, Pyrrha pulled back, and smiled at him, nodding that she was good to continue.

The two of them helped Jaune, who had no training, and Ren, who lacked upper body strength, up the wall after that point. There, Ranma took Jaune's and Pyrrha and Nora's armor, putting them into his ki space. "For the first few days the environment is going to be as much a threat to us as any Grimm. Pyrrha, Jaune, I want your shields too."

Both made to protest that, but at Ranma's firm look nodded. Nora, might have otherwise boasted about her upper body strength, didn't argue, just shimmying out of her armor and handing it over. Then they were down and into the crevice, where Ranma held up a hand once more. "And now, we have these for us all to wear." Ranma held up what looked like large, very fine nets covered with small gray and white patches.

Jaune recognized what they were instantly. "Camouflage gear. That's what you ordered back the day after the ball, right? The special order."

"Yep. Up here especially, cover isn't going to be common. These will break up our outlines and maybe make some Grimm miss our movements at all if we're careful and don't get close. If we have to, Ren or I will be the ones to take out the Grimm. We can do it quieter than the rest of you."

Pyrrha and the others nodded, taking the Gilly suits from Ranma, who showed them how to wear them, and move even at a walk, as now, without getting the ends tangled up. Then they were heading northeast along it as the crevice became steeper, then less.

The crevice, as Ranma knew it must, wound through the mountains for a time, coming to another valley, one which had nice slopes leading down to another, far smaller river. But this one was far higher into the mountains than Nike or the other valleys of Mistral, and the air was cold, their breath coming out in gasps.

"In the past, this crevice must have been carved by another river," Ren supposed, frowning, and looking at the rocks all around them. "These rocks are volcanic right?"

“Yep.” Ranma frowned for a second, then shrugged, pointing towards the west, the direction opposite the way they had to go. “Tectonic plates left these mountains behind as they shifted, I think. I remember seeing a volcano near where the shoreline is somewhere.”

Even Pyrrha, a native of Mistral had to think for a second, then nodded, still hugging herself under the Gilly suit. “The Maw of Anima, yes? It’s not quite a super-volcano, but it is known to explode from time to time. A few prospectors occasionally go out on expeditions there to try and discover raw Fire Dust veins. It’s said the Fire Dust from the Maw is the best in the world, for all the danger gathering it can become.”

Everyone found that interesting, but as they continued, team JNPR soon realized why Ranma had said the terrain would be against them. This high up not only was it cold, but the air was thin, something none of them had ever dealt with before. Pyrrha in particular was taking the cold hard. Jaune proved to be susceptible to becoming short of breath, and the cold impacted him almost as bad as it had Pyrrha at first. Ren was simply not fit enough to perform as well as the others, and his Aura reserves weren’t large enough to help him along as Jaune’s could.

But there were also Grimm. Not many, and most were flight types, Nevermore and a few local varieties. There were also a few Grimm based on cats which, thankfully, didn’t look enough like the furry monsters to drive Ranma crazy, and the same goat types that had been Ranma’s first introduction to Grimm when he first arrived in this world. There were also a few Hydras, but they were rare, slow moving and easily avoided, as much as it galled Pyrrha.

Keeping out of sight was not second nature to JNPR, but Ranma was firm. Any attack on a Grimm would bring more Grimm down on them. So, they had to move quietly and take what cover they could. Several times they had to backtrack or go to ground, or else come so close to Grimm that the Gilly suits wouldn’t have been enough to keep them hidden.

Worse was sleeping out here. Unlike in movies, there were no convenient caves and few outcrops. Instead, they slept in sleeping bags and tied to various outcrops. This was so startling, especially for Pyrrha, who wasn’t good at waking up, that several times there were nearly incidents that could well have brought the Grimm down on top of them.

But even so, two days later, after a lot of climbing and hiding, they began to go down once more, leaving the weird basin behind and finally heading further down towards the real vales below.

As they descended, more Grimm began to appear, and more than moving unseen, thanks to the Gilly suits, silence became hard to maintain. This, alas, was when Nora began to have trouble.

Up to that point she’d been a rock, the most experienced climber beyond Ranma, always happy to help the others along or teach them where to look for holds. She also had the

easiest time of it physically. However, Nora was talkative, and noisy. She kept on trying to talk, and simply couldn't get used to the idea of silent movement.

She was always whispering to Ren or Pyrrha, asking 'what was that' or 'did you see that' when they began to see strange moss and trees, things that didn't exist in the more settled land of Mistral. She completely ignored Ranma's to be quiet several times and it came to the point where, two hours after they had begun to see larger groups of Grimm, that Ranma basically bluntly told her to "Zip it Nora, or I'll duct tape yer mouth shut. This is not a game. This is serious."

Nora's eyes narrowed dangerously at that, but Ren took her hand and gently spoke to her for a few moments, after which, with a grumble and a long drawn out sigh, the hammer wielder nodded, and became much better about the whole quiet thing. As they moved off after their next short break – they were still high enough the air was thin and Jaune and Ren needed to rest every few hours - Jaune moved over to Ren, asking quietly "And the reason why you didn't do that right away was..."

He left the question hanging, and Ren winced. "Nora without the ability to speak her mind or do what she wants would not be Nora. I can't control that, and I wouldn't try if I could."

"I agree. But here, Nora being Nora is unfortunately going to be an issue."

"We'll have to give her some way of working off her energy or well maybe going through with Ranma's idea of duct taping her mouth shut," Ren agreed.

"Maybe some kind of respirator mask," Pyrrha murmured. She'd been thinking about something similar, but more for warmth's sake than anything else. The cold higher up in the mountains had proven incredibly debilitating. "Something Nora could talk into, that no one else but her would be able to hear."

"That could work," Ren agreed with a smile.

"I can be quiet if I want to. I just don't want to, and I can hear you talking about me! Uncool," Nora growled, shaking her head at them all.

The rest of team JNPR apologized, but they still looked on worriedly as they continued on their way. Another two hours of slow progress passed, as they continued on their way, avoiding Grimm as they could. Occasionally, Ranma called a halt and headed ahead of them, but then came back, and ordered them to skirt around in different directions, forcing them up steep cliff faces or over the ledge of a small makeshift path.

Grimm here moved about in small groups or singly, depending on the type. In those first few days travelling down towards the distant greenery, the first large group was a group of Grimoats, three dozen strong, moving along like they were the goats whose form they aped.

They were relatively easy to avoid, dodging out of sight or going around, as they were not very observant, although they were aggressive, attacking Nevermore and the few Ursa that seemed to exist up here.

All four of team JNPR were now running into the problem: beyond Ranma's class back at Beacon, their training had all been simply to kill any Grimm they came across. That was not only foolish at this point but it wasn't part of their mission.

Luckily, Ranma had spent the days leading up to this mission beating that into their brains, and even Nora didn't have to be told more than once not to automatically start lining up a shot on the Grimm around them. She scowled in annoyance, but she stayed silent as they moved, and at around two in the afternoon, Ranma called a halt. "Down and to the left," he whispered, gesturing that direction. There were several Nevermore nearby sitting on individual nests.

There, they spotted what looked like a large cave, with a bear in front of it, grumbling and rocking at the ground, pulling at what looked like mushrooms. "Keep moving above and down. Ursa don't have good eyesight, but they have a decent sense of smell. Keep downwind of it."

The reason for the detour, which took them up a small cliff face and along another, was because the flat area they had been seen in the distance was currently occupied by a group of Grimoats. They were locked in battle with the first pack of Beowolves the Hunters had seen since entering the mountains, or indeed since reaching Mistral.

Hanging above and to the side of the lone Ursa's cave Nora stared. They'd seen the Grimoats run off single Ursa or Nevermore before this, but this was the first time they had seen a full-scale battle between the Grimm. *Oh yeah, hot Grimm on Grimm action, baby! I wonder if you could get the various groups to fight one another like this more often.*

Soon they were down the other side of the cliff face, where they found a narrow path of scree leading further downward. With Ranma in the lead, they soon began to put more space between them and the battle going on, the noise of it slowly receding behind them, as JNPR all breathed out sighs of relief.

That relief did not last. Barely an hour after the last sounds of battle had disappeared behind them, Ranma called an instant halt, holding up his hand, then clenching it into a fist to indicate absolute silence. Everyone behind him paused, even Nora having learned by this point to keep her voice to herself. Ranma then pointed to the right and upwards, causing the other four to turn in that direction, and slowly creep along, hiding behind a piece of rock that stuck out from the rest of the mountain around them.

"What did you see Ranma?" Pyrrha asked, whispering the words into his ears.

“Demon Goat,” Ranma said.

Jaune, Ren and Nora looked confused for a moment, as Pyrrha scowled. “What’s that?”

“You wouldn’t have learned about it yet and Beacon, it’s not commonly seen near Vale,” Pyrrha said thoughtfully. “I’m assuming Ranma, that the theory it’s an evolved version of the Grimmoat?”

“Yep. I’ve only seen one a few times, but they can be darn tough to deal with.” He frowned thinking about it and then very slowly pushed his head out behind the cover, staring down to where the Demon Goat was sitting on a boulder, grunting and gnawing at something in his mouth.

The Demon Goat lived up to its name. It had the body of a goat right enough, but several sizes too large, with four long arms sprouting up from its back, with two more sprouting from its front and the head of a lion paired with wicked looking horns, so long that they looked almost like tentacles coming from its head. Those horns could indeed shift and move like tentacles, or harden into spears, and were extremely dangerous from what Ranma had been told by Spring. Its tail was just as dangerous as the rest of it. The thing ended in a mace, and could sprout dozens of tiny needles, able to shoot them in every direction. The same went for the long nails at the end of the hands.

“How smart are they?” Ren asked.

Ranma frowned thinking. “That is a good question. But it is an S-class Grimm, which means we need to kill it.”

“Great. How?” Jaune questioned, being quite willing to try but not seeing how they could do that just yet without the local Grimm figuring out humans were in the forest.

“You three stay here,” Ranma ordered, pointing to Jaune Nora and Pyrrha. “Stay hidden, and stay calm, remember? Ren, scout around to the east, I’ll go west. We need to make sure that there aren’t any other Grimm that it could summon up quickly to its aid.”

“Thank God it’s not like a dragon then,” Nora laughed.

Jaune looked at her quizzically. “Dragon Grimm?”

“They’re supposed to be able to spit out griffins, like that squid thing you did with the smaller amphibian type grip,” Nora answered.

“Right, don’t go looking for a Dragon then I’ll make a note of it.”

“Meh, they exist, for certain. There is supposed to be one or two to the south of Vacuo in the Grimm lands beyond the city-state’s borders.”

As Jaune and Nora both paled at the blasé way he said that, Ranma stood up, winked at Pyrrha, and moved off. He made his way back of the small trail they had been following, and then out onto the side of the mountain, which again here was a sheer cliff face, moving around where he had seen the Demon Goat.

He and Ren met up on the other side of the culvert leading down to the tiny valley where the Demon Goat was sitting, and both of them shook their heads. It turned out it wasn’t actually a valley, or at the very least, it wasn’t one that led out into bigger valleys in the distance. Instead, it was small, the other side of it almost as steep as the one they had been following down into it and that gave Ranma an idea.

He moved around back to the others, then I explained his plan. Once it was explained to them, the others all nodded, with Nora grinning. “Just remember, Nora, no battle cries or anything, just hammer time, okay?” Ranma warned.

Nora nodded, a gleeful thought occurring to her that maybe she should make that her war cry. After all, she could then say that he had said that was the only one she could use, right? But she didn’t. Instead, she followed Ranma back up the crevice they had been climbing down, then moved out onto the ledge they’d been following earlier, which was lined on one side with a kind of curving rock formation.

With Nora in place, Ranma left her there, moving to the other side of the strange small area that the Demon Goat was occupying. There he thrust his finger down into the stone, using the breaking point technique.

With a thunderous crack, the stone in front of him broke off, and began to tumble downwards. Two more uses of the breaking point technique sent further boulders tumbling, while Nora did the same with her hammer on the other side, the noise of it carrying much further than Ranma would’ve liked but doing the job. Tons of rubble began to fall, heading towards the Demon Goat.

It looked up, in shock, then tried to scurry out of the way, but the avalanche was coming from two different directions, and it couldn’t get out from under it. The Demon Goat couldn’t get away and was soon buried.

Nodding over to Ren, Ranma gestured downwards, and then gestured to Jaune and Pyrrha upwards towards where Nora was, indicating with a hand motion that when they got there, they should lay low for a bit.

With Ren meeting him, Ranma moved among the fallen rocks, looking for any movement.

There was a bit of movement for a moment, and with Ranma nodding, Ren thrust his gun into the opening thus revealed, and fired several dozen times. Normally Storm Flower wouldn't have had enough punch to get through even a normal Grimm's bone armor, and he'd have to aim for one of eyes or the uncovered points. But after the pounding that the Demon Goat had taken, these bullets proved to be the straw that broke the camel's back.

Smoke began to escape from under the rocks and several bits of rubble had fell down into the opening the dead Grimm made as it dissipated before the mound settled once more.

"Wait here, I'm going to go get the others and then will head down again."

Ren nodded, smiling faintly. "My first S class Grimm. I'll admit that didn't happen as I thought it would, but this kind of subtle conflict actually suits me quite well, I think."

Ranma grinned, smacked him on the shoulder, and soon, the group was on its way once more.

"Is it going to be like that every time we ambush one of the targets?" Pyrrha asked quietly as they resumed their journey.

Ranma nodded. "As best we can, yeah. We don't want the enemy to know we're here, and remember, there might be a mind behind these Grimm. We always have to think about that you know?"

"And that is still nightmare fuel," Jaune Nora and Pyrrha said as one, before laughing at one another as they stood up, ready to go.

Ranma once more left them behind for a few moments as evening began to fall, but when he came back, he told them he'd found a place for them to stay the night, in relative safety and comfort, something that they hadn't had in the past three days of hard travel.

The place where the group stopped was a tiny-seeming cave which opened up further once you entered it, something Ranma had discovered when he explored it. You had to crawl in, which mean that no Grimm they'd so far seen could enter. The cave also overlooked a small river, flowing to the northeast and Ranma looked at Pyrrha. "Do you think that will take us to the main river?"

"I think so," Pyrrha said frowning thoughtfully. "I'm not sure. It's going in the right direction anyway."

"That works," Ranma answered with a nod. "We'll follow the river from now on. Until we're into the operations area anyway."

Soon all of them were inside the cave. There was enough room for all of them, though cooking would be a bit tough, and if anyone felt a call of nature, they would have to do it outside.

And the instant all of them were in the cave, Nora asked quickly. "Can we talk louder now? Only this is really getting to me!"

"Honestly, I think you all did pretty well after the first few hours," Ranma smiled. "And if you want to be loud just keep to the back of the cave. Meanwhile, I'll put together a warm meal for us."

"PANCAKES!!" Nora squealed, grabbing at Ranma and shaking him so hard his head looked almost like a bobblehead for a moment. "Say yes, please say yes, please say yes or I'll break your legs!"

"Gah fine, damn it you crazy ginger, leave me alone and Ren can make it for you!" Ranma grumbled breaking her grip and pushing her, so she fell against Ren.

With Ren and Ranma both working, they quickly created a very strange meal: warm pancakes and syrup with tacos, with meat, salsa, cheese and other fixings. As they cooked, Pyrrha and Jaune had everyone laughing as they talked about this comic series the two of them enjoyed, with Pyrrha having gotten hooked on it since coming to Beacon. Then during the meal, Nora began to explain some dreams she'd been having over the past few days which had her becoming some kind of spider-woman who needed to have syrup to live. All in all, it was a very nice time, and everyone, save Ranma felt some tension they'd felt since entering the Grimm Lands leave them at last.

The next day, they followed the river as Ranma had suggested they do and continued doing so for the rest of the week. Then the tributary began to dry up however and concern began to make itself known among team JNPR. "Are we lost?"

Ranma shrugged. "We might not know where we are, that doesn't mean we're lost."

"That was almost Zen," Ren chuckled.

"Yeah, but seriously, without the river, are you sure that this is the right direction?" Jaune demanded.

Pyrrha grimaced, knowing that it been her who had given Ranma the impetus to follow the river in the first place. But Ranma shook his head, waving her off. "Don't worry about it, while this river looks to have dried up. Look at the speed of it."

Everyone frowned, and after only a moment, Ren got it, nodding. "It's gone underground."

Ranma nodded, then pulled out the compass, and smiled warmly over at Pyrrha. "Don't worry Pyr. you were right, it's going in the right direction of Spartoi. For now, rest. We're in for some bad weather tomorrow, and we can take a rest here before moving on."

"We haven't seen any alpha Grimm, it's just all been B and C level people," Jaune murmured, having kept a tally of the types of Grimm they'd seen, as well as an estimate of the amounts. "And there aren't as many Nevermore as I would have thought."

"There usually aren't on Mistral. When they reach a certain level of numbers, they attack the valley," Pyrrha answered, her tone Grimm even as she leaned back into Ranma's touch the two of them having taken one side of the cave as their own.

He was working on her shoulders and neck, giving her a massage that was positively heavenly after the hardship of the past few days. *And I can tell he's enjoying it too*, she thought fighting back a blush and a giggle as she felt that reaction behind her. "We, mmm, we pair back their numbers until they grow again."

"How do Grimm grow? Or even are born?" Nora suddenly asked, looking interested. "I mean, do they get it on like regular animals or what?"

"If they do, I've never seen them at it," Ranma laughed. "I've seen an Ursa evolve into a Ursa Major, and I've seen a few Iguanas grow into Great Spitters. But I've never seen them spawn."

"It sometimes worries me how little we know about the Grimm. Where did they come from?"

"I've heard religious theories," Ren said in answer to Jaune's question "But that's about all. Although I will say that the fact that they both ape the other creations of the Two Brothers and feel out our emotions to attack us does lend a certain credence to that idea."

Nora scoffed, rolling her eyes. "Whatever Rennie. I'll believe there are gods and stuff like that when one of them comes by to introduce himself. I have always taken the Alien creature concept?"

Jaune and Pyrrha both looked blank at that, and Ren explained. "One of the ideas we came up with ourselves as to where Grimm came from was that maybe they are some kind of bio-weapon developed by aliens to wipe out humanity. It's obviously just an idea but..."

"It's real I tell you! They destroyed the moon, and then dropped the Grimm onto us, just like the String from Annie McMarty's Narratives of Dern series, only there's an actual alien mind behind it!" Nora exclaimed, waving her arms wildly.

Everyone laughed at that for a few moments, causing Nora to pout, then start to laugh along with them.

“What about you Ranma,” Pyrrha asked as she got her laughs under control, absently noting that her movement had finished the task of fully awakening what she decided to name the stallion’s rod underneath her rear. “What do you think about the Grimm?”

“Well, remember what I told you about there being someone out there who is controlling them, some Queen Grimm or whatever. I have no idea how that came about, and frankly, I’m not all that interested. What I’m interested in most, is ways of killing them and more particularly High Queen her Royal Bitch,” Ranma snarked.

“Hear, hear,” Nora cheered.

Chuckling, Ranma looked over at Jaune and the others. “You all should get some rest. Pyrrha, pull out some food for tonight and then you bed down too. I’ll take first watch.”

That was another thing they’d had to get used to, beyond the whole being tied into their sleeping bags and dangling like spiders: rotating watches. They’d been told about the need, it was part of why is from every Academy that train hunters trained them in teams of four, and Ranma made it easier for them, breaking it down into times of six throughout the night, with Ranma taking two of them. With his endurance, it was nothing to miss a few hours of sleep. But the others still had been somewhat stunned at the need.

However, tonight, Pyrrha had other things on her mind rather than sleep. “I’ll take second watch,” she announced, smiling over her shoulder at Ranma, even as she stood up and moved to their packs which Ranma pulled had out of his ki space earlier to let them have some drinks. As she did, she smiled a very slight, infinitely proud smile as she felt Ranma’s eyes locked on her rear and hips.

“You do know that this whole ki space thing of yours is completely spoiling us, right?” Jaune asked jokingly. “Camping will never be the same after this.”

Ranma shrugged. “It’s not like I brought along multiple sleeping bags or anything like that, you all had to carry your own daily gear beyond your armor,” he reminded Jaune, before smirking over at Nora and Ren, who are arguing quietly between them as to whether or not they should zip their two sleeping bags together tonight, the first night they’d be able to do so.

Ren looked over at Ranma and Jaune, but Jaune studiously turned his head away and Ranma just grinned at him. Then, to add insult to injury, gave him a thumbs up.

A hiss of ‘traitor’ reached his ears from Ren even as Nora gleefully grabbed up the sleeping bags and began to zip them together, humming a little song delightedly to herself. Ranma couldn’t make out the words, she was speaking to low even for him, but he heard the

phrase 'cuddle with Ren' several times and wondered idly if that was all the song was, just her saying that line over and over again. He certainly wouldn't put it past the odd ginger-haired girl.

"You sure you don't want me to take an extra watch tonight, Ranma?" Jaune teased, looking over at Pyrrha as she busied herself pulling out various bits of food, and the small heating device that Ranma had brought along for their cooking needs. It wouldn't create fire or smoke, and it wouldn't make anything huge, but it could at least soften some of the hardtack and crusty bread.

"Look at you, learning how to tease finally," Ranma snorted. "Or does being able to tease in this area come from having seven sisters?"

"A bit of both your influence and theirs, yeah," Jaune laughed.

Pyrrha looked over at him team leader, her face concerned. "Does it bother you? If it does, we'll stop even flirting in front of you if you want."

Jaune shook his head with a laugh. "I wouldn't do that to you. If you want to flirt or cuddle in a safe place like this, that's fine, I can just post myself by the entrance and keep a watch."

"Fine, but don't think we're going to abuse this," Ranma announced earnestly, before smirking. "Seriously Jaune, speak up if it bothers you at any point, and we'll stop. It might help us keep our emotions positive and all that, but team dynamics are more important."

With that, they all retired bar Ranma and Pyrrha, who decided to forego a few hours extra sleep to spend time together. They didn't do anything that night, just cuddled and talked, and talked and more talked. About food, about martial arts, about family. Ranma came clean with a lot of his past, although he still didn't quite share his being from another world thing. At this point it served no purpose. He told her about the Maidens, about Spring, and Ozpin possibly having an immortality Semblance, which shocked Pyrrha to the core, but she accepted it and the need for secrecy.

In return, Pyrrha told Ranma small things about herself, nothing so momentous, but things she had never shared with anyone. A few childhood adventures, a few training mishaps, the moment when she realized without doubt that she could no longer call her father that term, when she had decided she no longer saw him as family. And finally, she spoke about her secret dreams for the future, her hopes of leaving behind her fame, of having a simple life at her family farm. Possibly as just a farmer, possibly as a trainer sought out by those who wished to be Hunters or Huntresses.

That was a dream Ranma could see himself taking up to. He had loved the small Vale of Nike, and would have loved to spend some more time there, in the distant future. "Especially the dogs. I loved them."

Early the next morning, Ranma's prediction proved true. The clouds he'd seen in the distance earlier that day came in and brought their friends, dumping substantial amounts of cold rain down onto them. Despite being well above the regular rain forest-type greenery of the human-occupied valleys, this was still part of Mistral, and thus received a large amount of rain, just like the rest of it.

The group stayed in the cave for the next day, playing cards and, in the case of the two couples, flirting just a tiny bit. Neither twosome wanted to make Jaune uncomfortable. But mainly JNPR just rested, not having been able to sleep well on the trail since more of the time they hadn't been able to find a flat space to do so without being tied into the mountain with ropes and carabiners.

But after the rain passed, they were on their way once more. And as they traveled further down the mountain, the young hunters were struck by just how many Grimm there were. Every day they saw more Grimm, of the trio of types found in these mountains, moving about the wilderness like the animals they mimicked, but these were joined by more Beowolves and a few larger types, including several Hydras now. The number of Grimm, and how animal-like they acted surprised all of them, despite Ranma's warnings and Professor Ports ~~torture~~ lessons.

But with Ranma in the lead they moved through them like wraiths, slipping through undetected as above them, hundreds of Nevermore flew. Here they passed over Ursa, keeping quiet, always keeping their emotions in check.

"Very few Grimm have senses equal to the animal they're supposed to look like," Ranma reiterated one evening, gesturing back the way they'd come at a group of Beowolves that they had passed. "A real wolf could smell a human from miles away, heck it could even tell ya what we ate last night. A Beowulf? No chance. Beowulf alphas might have a sense of smell, but nothing like a real wolf. Same goes for eyesight and other senses. What they do have, is the ability to find your emotion."

All of this was things that they had learned before, but out here, moving through the Grimm without attacking, it brought it to mind far more strongly than anything else had ever heard even as the way forward became still easier, and the first swathes of jungle could be seen.

OOOOOO

As Ranma and team JNPR were pushing into the Grimm lands, another band moved through the Grimm lands, their own movements much more self-assured, almost arrogant. None of them feared the Grimm, and without fear, the Grimm would not gather in sufficient numbers to threaten the clan unless they were stupid enough to go looking for a fight. And if the Grimm did come for them, what of it? The individual feeling fear would be stuck there, and

the rest would retreat, either overland, or through their leader's Semblance, and the Clan would become stronger.

At the moment, the clan was on the move, wanting to get into position to watch the entrance from the more civilized lands into Spartoi.

"What do you think about this boss?" asked a young woman, looking up adoringly at her leader. "I have to think there's was more to that big guy's interests in this Azure Warden than just wanting him dead."

The leader, a raven-haired woman wore a grandma mask, which made the ones the Black Fang / White Fang whatever they're called, shrugged her make made there's look like child's toys, shrugged her shoulders. "What does it matter? He might be a strong opponent, in which case, the clan will grow stronger in challenging him or we can kill him easily, in which case it will be easy money. Which we can use to buy more weapons upgrades." Raven Branwen of Clan Branwen smiled behind her mask. "One way or the other we'll be coming out of this ahead, and that's all that matters, right?"

She was answered with a brief cheer as they continued on their way towards the Spartoi Valley.

OOOOOO

Eventually moving through the valleys and hills of the Grimm Lands brought Ranma and JNPR to the valley directly west from the one they were aiming for. There, the ground was an odd mix between streams and hard stone, giving way to numerous small swamps and grassy plains, with few scattered trees. The various streams and brooks merged visibly into one river, heading east towards the distant Spartoi Valley.

Instead of pushing on through the odd area, Ranma decided to slow them down, pointing out the mixed nature of the Grimm here, and the nature of the terrain. Half seemed to be Beowolves and lizard-like Grimm called White Manders, others looked like the froglike Grimm called Mad Ribbits. "We'll need to be careful about them, and about leaving tracks behind us. We'll practice doing that and talk about what kind of senses these Grimm could have before moving on."

Jaune nodded, smiling around at the place, Nora of all people had pointed out to them as a possible resting place. It was a series of trees that had grown up and around a brook, twining together and then coming apart, essentially creating a series of small wooden bowls. Though open to the sky, they were each closed off to one another, and could give the two couples the first privacy they'd had in days, plus allowing Jaune some time on his own.

Ranma was a little guilty about that, and during lunch, Ranma pulled him aside, asking him how he was going. But Jaune surprised him, laughing it off. "God, are you kidding me? Do

you have any idea how many boyfriends, and not a few girlfriends, I've seen come and go back on the ranch? Trust me, just don't have me in the same room, and I'm happy. Hell, I'm happy with having time to myself too. You have no concept of how rare that was growing up." He groaned theatrically, smirking at Ren who smiled back. "And then I come to Beacon, and what do I find, I get to share a room with another boy and two girls. GAH."

Later, the group split up into the different bowls. They were small, forcing a certain closeness, which was more than acceptable, but Ranma warned Pyrrha, as she sat on his lap like a queen on her throne, that he wanted to wait a bit. "We don't know if any Nevermore or other flyers use these spaces."

"Hmm... well, that might be true, but if you really are against fooling around a bit, you're going to have to do a much better job of convincing me you don't want to," Pyrrha trilled, an atavistic and altogether female feeling of delight filling her. With a smirk she once more began to rub her rump this way and that in Ranma's lap as she twisted her body to kiss Ranma on the chin and then the lips.

Ranma responded quickly despite his earlier nod towards not bothering Jaune, his turgid length stiffening between Pyrrha's cheeks once more. The feel of that reminded what they had done the night back at her family's ranch, and Ranma felt his arousal rising further. Pyrrha gasped a little as Ranma's fingers worked inside her blouse from the bottom and then downward while his other hand went under her the blouse she wore under her armor.

He didn't make any effort to touch Pyrrha's panties directly. Instead, he trailed his fingers up and down her thighs, crossing over directly above where her panties began. Meanwhile, As Pyrrha kept the kiss going, his other hand, reached up to cup one of her breasts, his thumb working on one of her nipples through her bra.

In reply, Pyrrha began to twitch her rear this way and that, and then back and forth, back and forth until she raised herself just enough for Ranma's shaft to bounce to full erection under his clothing. Sitting down once more, Pyrrha captured Ranma's cock between her thighs, then began to slowly squeeze and move her thighs, barely letting his clothed length press against her own clothed underwear. But even that touch was electric, and both of them groaned, the noise muffled by the kiss.

That kiss began to be a little wilder, a little deeper as they pressed their lips together tighter, their tongues dueling in first Ranma's mouth, then the other, heightening the sensation.

For Pyrrha, the added pressure of sitting on Ranma like this, instead of letting him control things as had been the case that night back at her family's farm, seemed to heighten the feeling. For Ranma it caused some discomfort, but he was fighting it, letting her take control.

But neither of them was feeling very frenetic, so to speak, and after a few moments in this new position, both of them slowly pulled back. For a moment, Pyrrha's tongue stuck out from her mouth, and Ranma stared at it in the light of the little light coming in from the cave's entrance, the sight mesmerizing him, before he gently reached out with his own tongue, licking and twining his tongue with hers for just a moment. This caused Pyrrha to gasp, but she returned the emotion gleefully.

After that though, they pulled back, just gently humping against one another as Pyrrha lay back against Ranma's chest, one hand softly twinning through Ranma's hair, her lips kissing at his chin and neck and vice versa.

If Ranma had a term for being with Pyrrha like this, it would've been 'intoxicated.' Pyrrha was intoxicating. Touching her, feeling her skin under his fingers under his lips, this gorgeous redhead who had become attracted to Ranma the individual, not Ranma the prize to be won. Knowing what he knew about her made their connection even greater. He had seen her in battle, sad and awkward in social situations. Ranma knew Pyrrha Nikos, the woman and the warrior and loved her for it.

For Pyrrha, the phrase would probably be somewhere between content and joyfully delirious. Here she was in the arms of an amazing specimen of a man, one who wanted her as a woman, as a person, as Pyrrha Nikos, the chocolate addict, night owl and adrenaline junky. It was just amazing, a dream given form. *Oh yes, this is the man for me. Ten years, twenty years from now, this is the man I want.*

Finally, the small, slow movements, the tender touch brought Pyrrha completion not with a crash, but with a gentle crest. It was different from what had happened back at their farm, but in a way, it was perhaps more fulfilling. She let loose a tiny little whimper that sent a bolt of pleasure down Ranma's spine. It was a muffled sound, the two of them exchanging another deep kiss, which only made it sound a little more animal-like, more primal.

As she slowly recovered from her orgasm, Pyrrha began to shift more this way and that, turning from kissing Ranma to look down at her lap in some fascination as Ranma's cockhead appeared between her thighs. Up and down, back and forth, shifting slowly from side to side she went, listening to Ranma's breathing becoming deeper, more labored. Pyrrha continued to watch, leaning back against Ranma, feeling his arms around her, her hands on his as her hips continued to work, watching in fascination as he came, biting her lip in delight as his tent exploded upwards a bit, then became noticeably darker, wetter. "MMMMM...."

Hearing Pyrrha's delighted purr, Ranma chuckled throatily, leaning into her neck, biting at it for a moment before their lips locked once more. No words were exchanged as the intense make out session slowly ended and Pyrrha nuzzled into Ranma's shoulder, turning entirely to rest chest to chest against him, as they fell asleep.

The next morning, Ranma was up with the dawn, gently moving from one sleeping back to another, although, if anyone asked, he woke up Pyrrha last, rather than first. The fact they used this time to make out a bit was no one's business than her own.

Alas, over breakfast, the rest of the world decided to intrude on the twosome's time. "You know how I said I was fine with you two couples canoodling?" Jaune muttered, looking at Nora and Pyrrha before looking away, his eyes noticeably drooping. "I'm sorry, I was wrong. I'm weaker than I thought, and it bothered the heck out of me last night."

"It has nothing to do with weakness, it has everything to do with having a sense of hearing that it just slightly better than you thought," Ren said, looking apologetic with Ranma and Pyrrha making agreeing noises. "I'm sorry about that."

"Aww, but I wanted Rennie to show me new ways of using his little hammer!" Nora muttered, before shrugging. "Oh well, there's always when we get back to Beacon."

Pyrrha and Ranma glanced at one another then away, trying hard not to blush.

"Sorry Jaune, we'll make sure that we don't get a little too lost. Hugging though, is going to happen!" Nora went on. "I demand my hugs. You have taken away my warm pancakes, but now that I have had the hugs and the true booping, I refuse to do without hugs."

To everyone's surprise, Ren was nodding agreement to this, and Ranma sent the man a smirk. *So much for his protestations about disinterest.* Jaune too was also looking at him, his eyebrows wagging, as Pyrrha giggled.

Ren bore up under their looks with commendable aplomb and then gestured down to the meal Ranma was cooking. "Do you want some help with that?"

Two more days passed as they pushed through the jungle, and they began to run into far more Grimm than previously.

The first large group they spotted was a group of Boarbatusks. They were eighteen or twenty strong, moving through the territory at a leisurely pace, sniffing at the trees around them. Occasionally, one of them would mark one of the trees with a tusk, growl or head but one of the others. They acted pretty much like boars would in the wild, something that for some reason caused Jaune to chuckle whenever he saw it. "I mean, the Grimm are essentially killing machines. Seeing them act like they are just regular animals is just so weird!"

The group also took to the trees on Ranma's orders. This allowed them to move through the jungle unseen by the Grimm below, so long as they did so silently. This slowed their progress quite a bit. Keeping silent and moving from one tree to another was hard, even with Ranma stowing all of their armor in his ki space as he still did. If he hadn't been able to do that, trying this would've been impossible. As it was, it was simply very difficult. But, by the end of

the day, both Pyrrha and Ren were able to do it easily, while Nora and Jaune were able to do it, although neither would describe their progress as good.

As Ranma had known, sticking to the lower boughs of the trees put the five humans in a sort of border zone between the land and aerial Grimm. The land Grimm rarely looked up, and the Aerial Grimm rarely perched in all but the largest trees, and even there didn't look down at the ground often. The only Grimm who would see them here were the larger varieties, the Hydra and others of that size range, who were easy to see coming. Which was a good thing, as the number of Grimm continued to bother them.

Nora, Pyrrha and Jaune all felt themselves growing anxious as they slowly moved forward. Astonishingly to their eyes, Ranma didn't seem to care one way or another. And Ren was his normal calm collected self. But despite this, they continued on well enough, their Gilly suits now changed out for green ones, letting them move around relatively unimpeded.

That is, until they spotted their next target and it nearly spotted them.

The target in question was a horse-like Grimm, it's lower body almost entirely that of a horse, although its hooves looked like someone had grafted small claws onto them all around the hooves. Grafting seemed to be a theme here, as halfway down the horse-like portion of the Grimm's body, someone had placed the body of a thin Grimm-like human, its face, like that of the horse segment protected by bone Armor. The tail of the beast was twined, each end small, but ending in a wicked curve, as did the long demonic horns rising from the sides of the human portion's head. Bony spikes protruded here and there.

The things eyes, again both sets, were red. The horsehead's mouth was open, allowing red to be seen within. The other's mouth looked as if it had been sewn shut but even so, the thing was easily the vilest looking Grimm Ranma had seen.

And as the Grimm creature moved through the area ahead of them it seemed to emit a sensation of fear, which hammered into team JNPR. All four of them looked around wildly, wondering where that had come from, before Ranma spotted the movement of the large creatures through the rocks and scattered trees. He instantly held up a fist, and gesture down to the ground, ordering the team to go to ground while reaching out, grabbing Ren and Pyrrha, who were out in the open right now minus their Gilly suit.

Ren had frozen, staring at the creature, but now he found himself hoisted off his feet and tossed back under cover. Pyrrha was a bit too far and found her hair under the Gilly suit being grabbed before Ranma pulled her back by her hair, causing her to wince, but the practice of the last few weeks served her in good stead, keeping her quiet even as Ranma pulled her back behind a tree.

For a moment, they were all quiet, hiding, there the feel of Ren's Semblance washing over them, making them all calm, and collected, hiding them from the Grimm's ability to sense

negative emotions while deadening their own. Ranma watched, crouching on the ground for a time as the Nuckelavee moved on, then held up a hand, the hand coming out of his own Gilly suit. He held it up flat then shifted it backwards, counting down from one.

With Jaune in the lead, the group fell back and away from the point of contact, moving slowly, with Ren still using his Semblance for some reason. When they got far enough away Ranma felt it was safe, Ranma gestured them up into the trees, where he let the others remove the Gilly suits from their faces. It was then that Ranma saw why Ren was still using his Semblance. The young man was pale and shaking while Nora's eyes were narrowed with rage.

Looking at Jaune and Pyrrha, he saw they too were looking concerned now that Ren's Semblance had fallen away for a moment. "That was a Nuckelavee. It's probably the most dangerous S-class Grimm around here, and one of the smartest too. Ren, Nora? You two look like you've seen a ghost."

"In a way, we have," Ren murmured, with Nora moving over to lean into him shivering. "That creature was, it was the Grimm that led the assault on our hometown before we became orphans. It, it wiped out everyone that tried to stand against it."

The others all gathered around the odd couple, with Jaune and Pyrrha going so far as to pull them into a group hug. Ranma joined in a bit, gripping their shoulders with silent concern for a time. Eventually the two recovered, and Ranma gestured in the direction the Nuckelavee had gone. "Is it going to be a problem? Can you two keep it together? We have to take it out, it's aura of fear alone makes it a game changer, let alone it's brains."

Both young Hunters nodded, although there was a snarl on Ren's lips Ranma didn't like, and it fell to Nora to ask an important question because Ren was still too emotional to do the same. "That's great and all, but how? I don't see any places where we can drop a large number of boulders on around here. And if we still need to hide our presence, that limits us dangerously."

Ranma nodded, glancing around them. "No, but there are a few swamps..."

Obviously, being a native to this area, the Nuckelavee would know about the swamps. Which in turn meant moving them.

The five of them spent the rest of the day moving around the area, getting a feel for the lay of the land. The next morning, with Ren on watch, Pyrrha and Nora worked for several hours, shifting boulders and digging at the ground to bring two streams move slightly more together, they were able to slowly shift some of the swamps around, breaking up the ground there and making it as ready as they could for the redirected water. It took more than a few days to do this, and the ground only slowly began to soften. But they were helped by days of heavy rain, and by the time they'd been at it for six days two small, disparate swamps had become one modest-sized swamp in between the previous two.

With Ranma keeping track of the Nuckelavee the others added to this ambush zone. The new changes were a few scattered hides elsewhere. Then, when Ranma came back late in the afternoon, it was ready.

Ranma went back out and let the Nuckelavee see him. Not enough of his face to identify Ranma, but enough for the Grimm to realize he was human. That was enough to get the Nuckelavee to come after him, sending other Grimm in on him. Ranma killed the other Grimm as they attacked, retreating, never letting the Nuckelavee close. Then he led it back to the ambush point, before going entirely to ground nearby in a small hide, leaving tracks leading right into the new swamp.

There, oddly, the Nuckelavee paused. Its horse-like half stopped moving, and its 'imp' half came alive, twisting around this way and that, looking down at the markings on the ground then around, releasing a terrifying scream. "CREEEAYAAAA!!!!"

Meanwhile Pyrrha and Jaune and Nora all began to tremble, the fear the monstrous Grimm exuded affecting them until Ren activated his Semblance, quickly covering all four of them, gritting his teeth at the impact of the fear aura to his control. Ranma, behind the Nuckelavee's current position, didn't need the help. The creatures cry and aura mattered not at all to him.

Then Ren very deliberately reached out and shook a nearby bush. That brief glimpse of movement was enough for the Nuckelavee to look in that direction with both its heads. It walked forward, each step becoming deeper and waterier, until the creature paused once more, looking down once more just at the edge of what Ranma estimated to be the deepest segment of the swamp. Once more the imp came alive, staring all around, then leaning over its horse half to stare at the ground.

With another cry, the Nuckelavee backed away slightly. There it paused again, staring towards where he had sensed humans, and then back down to his feet before shifting to walk around the swamp they had created. At the same time, its arms began to change shape, becoming longer and thinner.

Seeing this, Ranma muttered, "Oh, fucking hell no!" and came out of the hide he had created on this side of the swam. He moved so fast that he was on the Nuckelavee before it could twist its human head around. The thing still flailed at him, but Ranma ducked under it and bodychecked the creature, sending the Grimm, who for all its danger wasn't very heavy, off its feet and into the swamp.

There, it hit side-on and both portions of its body began to sink. But one hoof shifted in size, the leg lengthening quickly to grab at the edge of the semi-solid ground. The front hoof out of reach, the already enlarged arm on the top portion of the Nuckelavee's body began to flail wildly around trying to keep whatever had attacked it away even as the horse-head portion was pulled under the swamp.

Its tail too lashed out, but with half of its body in the swamp and unable to bring it around, it tried to flail, only for its initial position to fight against the attempt. With both halves of its body on its side the creature was very limited in terms of what it could do.

Ranma grunted as a few strikes found their mark but ignored them as his ki healing went to work almost at once. He grabbed the elongated arm with one hand, while bringing his lance down onto the hoof trying to grab at the ground. But the blow did nothing to the tough Grimm's hide causing Ranma to blink in shock.

Getting over his fear thanks to Ren's Semblance Jaune barked out orders. "Nora, Pyrrha, get me over there. Then Pyrrha aim for the thing's eyes. Nora, Ren, follow me around the swamp!"

A moment later, Jaune was catapulted through the air from a shot from Magnhild hitting his shield and flipping through the air he brought down his blade, slicing through the enlarged hoof and almost sinking into the swamp. Indeed, he would have if not for Ranma quickly reaching out and grabbing him out of the air, pulling him back and onto relatively solid land.

Jaune nodded at him, and as another blow from the tail opened Ranma up from shoulder to thigh, he resolutely brought his blade down on the same transformed hoof that was now trying to pull the creature back up out of the swamp before staring at Ranma's wound even as it closed. "By the brother... okay that is so weird, Ranma!"

Ranma snorted, but any response he could have made was overwhelmed as one of Pyrrha's shots cracked into the eye of the human-seeming head of the Nuckalevee. The creature screamed, but now most of its lower body was in the muddy swamp and it couldn't get out. Ren too was firing at the beast, spraying fire wildly with Storm Flower not having Pyrrha's skill.

"Do we shoot down into it?" Jaune grunted, bringing his blade down again on the same limb trying to pull the Nuckelavee back. "FUCK this thing's skin is hard!" Jaune had never run into a Grimm whose armor, let alone skin, his family's ancient blade couldn't cut.

"Thrust, don't cut, and Nora, defense!" Ranma ordered Another blow landed on Ranma's chest, and Nora moved in, smacking the next blow wide with Magnhild.

For several moments, the human-portion's limb, having felt Ranma's body, sought him out again, while Jaune continued to try and pierce through the hoof holding the Nuckelavee to the ground. He did so after three more thrusts, and started to then widen the wound, cutting the thing's clawed hoof off. With that, the only limb still flailing above the water of the swamp was the one connected to the Nuckelavee's human side.

“Nora, two grenades into the water. Pyrrha, Nora, keep it up!” Ranma ordered, firing into the water with his lance in rifle mode while the others did the same.

Backing away from where she had been defending the two men, Nora her face taut with tension despite Ren’s Semblance, fiddled with her weapon for a few moments, before doing as Ranma had ordered. The next instant, there were two muffled sounds and the fear aura instantly disappeared.

Ren, having felt that aura battering against his emotional control Semblance, shivered, then released the ability, collapsing to one side as Nora rushed to his side, grabbing him. Behind her, the others kept firing for a time until the bits of claw sticking out of the water began to turn into smoke. “Rennie are you okay! Ooh, please be okay! Without you who would boop me or make me pancakes or...”

“I’m okay, Nora,” he muttered. “Just exhausted. I’ve never used my Semblance more than one other person at a time. By the brothers that took it out of me!”

“I’ve been telling you since I had you in my first class that you need to work on your endurance,” Ranma chuckled, although he clasped Ren on the shoulder as did Pyrrha and Jaune.

With the effect of the battle still visible on the other’s expressions, Ranma ordered a retreat to the larger hide they had created earlier for this ambush. It was well he had, because several dozen Grimm, both land and aerial began to move through the area, searching, until two of them with Ranma watching from a distance, stumbled into the same bit of swamp where it had failed.

As he watched over the next few hours, the Grimm began to spread out, and eventually, the forest returned to normal.

In comparison to the assassination of the Nuckelavee, the next two Grimm were much easier. One was simply a Giant Death Stalker, one that made the one they had killed during their initiation look as small as a Creep. But it was hiding itself away in a cave. Bring down the cave, no problem.

The next one after that was a Wolf Lord, the final evolution so to speak of a Beowulf, who looked nothing like a Grimm version of a giant werewolf, several feet taller than the majority. Like wolves would in the wild, Beowulf’s ate meat and hunted although they attacked any animal, they could instead of just the weakest and most sickly.

But this need for meat let them lay another trap, leading the Beowolves to a small dale, and then wipe them out by a IED followed by Ranma and Ran moving in to finish the stragglers off in close combat. The explosion would have been noisy enough already to gather Grimm,

which it did in the form of Nevermore. But with Pyrrha on guard they were able to stick around long enough to see Ranma and Ren, despite the two of them still being out in the open.

Ranma was a little concerned about that, worried their actions would give their presence way to the mind of the Grimm Queen. But since they had been careful to stay out of sight, perhaps that would happen.

Eventually, from that Valley and out to her, which was as wide which looking at it from on, was as wide as dangerously accessible as everyone said had but, in the distance, in the distance, they saw the city of Spartoi, rising like a stone and if this little valley. It was barely visible from here, but its sharp angular lines could still be seen, marking it out as a created object rather than anything so, Pyrrha asked quietly, "What now?"

"Good question," Ranma muttered, scratching at his chin thoughtfully as they stared out through the jungle. "Very good question."

OOOOOOO

Cinder gasped as Salem initiated contact without any warning. "***Cinder, we must speak.***"

With the ease of years of practice, Cinder made it into a play, wincing and reaching down to touch her toe with as if she had just jammed it on the steps she was currently walking up. Ironically, small wounds like that were something that your aura couldn't do anything about. After all, it basically put your foot between an immovable object and the force of your own body.

It was a lame excuse, but it seemed to do the job covering for her with the logistics expert she was talking to waving the man on as she replied mentally to the summons. "***Mistress, I am talking with someone right now who does not know my secret.***"

"I will wait," came the response, ***"but not for long."***

A small quixotic part of Cinder wanted to make her wait for just a second, and then discarded the idea, burying the thought deep. *I am still a pawn, not yet Queen in my own right. I have to bide my time.*

It took her 15 minutes to break off discussion with the supply officer that would be seeing to the needs of the teams that would be taking part in the Spartoi Operation, but she firmly rebuffed the man's attempts to flirt with her, uncaring if this would give her the reputation as being a cold bitch, especially in conjunction with the subtle teasing that she had been doing. Instead, she made her way to the boat she and her team shared leaping aboard and making her way to their quarters quickly, closing the door behind her, locking it

Mercury looked up from his and Emerald's card game and seeing the look on Cinder's face both youngsters went on alert. Mercury moved to the doorway to guard it, while Emerald went into the bathroom, coming back with pills and water, looking at Cinder with her eyes wide in concern.

"Mistress, I am free now," she sent. A moment later she winced as the impression of her mistress's mind once more bombarded her, pressing down into her own psyche like a lead weight on a rubber ball distorting it and denting the surface.

"Good. Hazel and Tyrian have been able to find help that will aid them in killing the Azure Warden. Are your plans ready?"

"Yes, they are," Cinder answered simply. *"We will attempt to conquer the city; the attempt will fail, and the majority of Mistral's Hunters will die. Myself, and my two pawns, will lose our cover identities,"* she cautioned. *"That means we will not be able to enact our initial plan for Beacon."*

"That plan is gone anyway, although your concentration on it served us in good stead before. Autumn is safe for now, but she will remain there in her half dead state. Unless Ozpin and his coterie are able to duplicate the Aura transfer process I developed through my Grimm."

"Is that possible mistress?"

"Arthur seemed to believe it could be. But..." For a moment, there was a hint of...not concern or worry in Salem's voice but annoyance and confusion. "Arthur Watts did not respond to my call this morning."

Cinder's eyes widened, real concern rising in her mind now. *"Mistress, if he has somehow been found! My own identity, it could have been discovered as well! Watts knows far too much of all of us!"*

"Do not worry, I have my Seers looking for him."

Cinder suppressed a mental shiver at that. A recent creation of Salem, Seers were intelligent, and could somehow phase through solid objects. They rode other Grimm for the most part, not being very quick over long distances. But their ability to phase through objects, and the fact that they were created to allow Salem to control them meant that any one of them could be very dangerous, able to shift and mutate at will to a certain degree. They also tended to travel in packs of five, which just made the horror all the worse.

"That is good, at least," Cinder answered cautiously.

“Continue on with your own project. The Azure Warden is our primary concern right now. A male able to use the maiden powers is disturbing in the extreme. He needs to be slain for that if for no other reason.”

“Yes mistress,” Cinder said, although she was concerned. Salem sounded almost as if she was back to her normal cold, calculating self. If that happened...

She needn't have worried. Because, just as Cinder was talking to her, information began to come back to Salem, and she hissed in fury. ***“Once is happenstance, twice is luck, three times is enemy action!”***

“Mistress?”

“The Azure Warden, you told me that he might have his own plans of how to enter the Grimm lands around Spartoi. That it is indeed the case, and he is there now, hunting my generals in the area!”

“Then could you perhaps bring to bear sufficient numbers to crush him now?”

“If I could find him fool girl!” Salem barked, and the weight on her mind went from being a gentle pressure to being one of a fist hammering into her mind. ***“The fiend is so good at hiding I barely know the area he could be in, let alone where in that zone.”***

“I am sorry mistress, I have little understanding of the Warden's woodcraft” Cinder ground out but did not let the pain through her mental voice more than a minimum, knowing Salem had no truck with weakness, and more than one reason to not want Salem to start searching her mind.

The fist of pressure receded, and Salem went on more calmly, though her mental voice was still a hiss. ***“Continue your plan. The warden must die. My Grimm will be ready to do their part once he reveals himself. You be ready to make certain the task is done, and you might get a chance to use my little toy.”***

At that, Cinder felt a rush of interest, and made no effort to hide it and Salem went on, her voice a mental purr now. ***“I can feel your eagerness for it, your desire to use my little present to you once more. If the situation arises, do so. Male or female it matters not. Aura is at the base all the same. My toy will do just as well on him as it did on Amber.”***

Cinder allowed avarice to arise in her mind like a fog as she replied with an eager response. Deep, deep underneath that layer however, buried as far as she could push it, the thought came. *And so, the carnivore dangles the fruit in front of its prey. But I am no longer prey!*

Soon after that Salem cut the connection, and Cinder was left once more with blood during dripping from her nose as Emerald rushed to her side. Through her pain, Cinder smiled at Emerald, her lips twitching slightly. "The plan is still on," she said to which Emerald responded of tasty nod, and then began to dab at the blood, cleaning it up as best she could.

OOOOOO

"Hey sis, you ever get the feeling you're missing something?"

"What are you talking about Ruby?" Yang asked and to Ruby's horror, her voice didn't come from the top bunk bed as it should have. Instead, it came from the one below. Peering over the edge of her own bed Ruby feared what she would see. She breathed a sigh of relief as she saw that her sister was on top of the covers while Blake was underneath.

That would be bad enough once Weiss woke up, but Ruby didn't have a problem with the two of them cuddling like that. Although she did have a problem seeing both of them up so early. "Don't tell me the two of you stayed up all night?"

"No Ruby, we just woke up a little earlier than you guys," Yang said, smirking up at her sister, "as always. We just decided to use it for cuddle time instead of reading or training. Now, back to what you were saying?"

"Oh, um, like a feeling like you're just missing out on something. Almost, almost as if you become side characters in your own story."

"Can't say I've ever felt bad," Yang said frowning. "Why?"

"Just a feeling I've been getting, ever since that talk with Jaune."

"Oh Ho? Really, you and the Great Blonde Dork? Can't say I see the appeal myself. I'm more into the sultry sort," Yang said, winking at Blake, who smirked back, and languidly stretched before twisting out of bed, reaching up to pop Ruby on the nose. As Ruby went wild with pronunciations of the very idea, and Weiss woke up, very irritable for some reason. Just a typical day for team RWBY.

It wasn't going to last, as their scrolls went off a moment later.

End Episode 6, Chapter 21

So here is the first episode of the next chapter. I will show two more episodes before the big battle in Spartoi. That battle should be two more episodes, but would be the next chapter.