Thank you for your patience and support. We are entering the last stages of this arc.

Midday, July 5th.

“I told you, no! I can not allow anyone inside the town until the investigation is over. Sheriff’s orders.”

“Don’t give me that horseshit, Stebens. We’ve been hauling ass since yesterday to get here. We got folks out here starvin' and scared, and you're sittin' on your behind like a toad in a puddle! The whole darned countryside is overrun by Grimm.”

“And the town would soon be overrun by the wretched things if I let you all in, Emmett! We’ve already been attacked and that pompous clown Montgomery emptied the garrison for some fucking adventure. You will stay put until the investigation is over, and the Sheriff can screen you.”

Emmet scowled and looked around at his fellow Sheriffs and deputies from the many settlements in the region. They had agreed to nominate him as their speaker as he was the eldest and most experienced, but they didn’t expect for them to be stranded at the town’s entrance like this.

He looked behind him to find the nearly three thousand refugees, all the men, and even some women and children, were armed with small arms and carrying their meager belongings. He fingered his rifle uneasily, “Get the damn Sheriff here, then. Yer just a deputy, get him or the mayor or anyone else of import to screen us before the damn Grimm show up, if yer too worried to hold responsibility.”

Stebens flushed angrily from his position on top of the gates, “Go suck on a lemon, Emmet. Sheriff’s orders are to hold those gates and that’s what I’ll do. Isn’t that right, boys?”

The men on the walls, all of them militia, looked hesitant and uncertain. One of them boldly spoke up, “Maybe we should send for Sheriff Greaves? I’m sure he would–”

“I didn’t ask for your opinion, boy. I already sent for the Sheriff and he didn’t deign to reply. If his orders are to hold the gates, then we hold the damn gates!”

The refugees on the ground had mutinous looks and even the men on the wall were having severe doubts.

Stebens sighed loudly, “Look, Emmet. It’s not that I don’t understand your position, but we have to wait until at least the Garrison returns. We got some of them wounded folks from the tower yesterday, and if yeh can’t trust Montgomery, which I don’t blame yah, then at least trust in our fellow born and bred Celdician dragoons. The town’s already crowded enough as it is, adding another three thousand without the full garrison is asking for a disaster.”

“I don’t care about Brocket or his dragoons, they had become dogs of Vale long ago and forgot their roots.” Emmet angrily retorted, yet that caused the wavering militia on the walls to get angry as well at the insult to their local heroes.

“I’m afraid we will have to get through those gates one way or another, deputy. All these people are my responsibility and I ain’t gonna risk having them stranded out here in the open when we could be of more use inside the town and manning the damn walls for you.”

“Deputy! Look over yonder.”

Before Stebens could give another acerbic reply, one of his men pointed at three figures riding for the gates. The refugees had also seen them and parted way for the three riders to trot towards them.

“Valestein! Yer back.”

“Lo there folks,” The attractive woman called out with a smile. “What’s the hold up here?”

Stebens explained the situation, while noticing the two youths trotting over the refugees and their leaders, seemingly inspecting them.

“I see,” Valestein nodded. “You heard all of that, Lieutenant?”

“That I did. Good work on keeping the town safe, deputy. I’m giving authority for Valestein to act in my stead. Captain Montgomery also sends his blessings.”

Stebens was surprised by the sound that came out of the device in the woman’s hand. He easily recognized Lieutenant Brocket’s voice.

The adventurer didn’t wait for him to reply before turning to one of her companions. “Jaune, did you find anything suspicious.”

The blonde man moved beside her and shook his head, “Surprisingly no. I honestly expected someone to try to sneak in with such a large crowd.”

“Heh, you would think so, but no. That’s an amateur mistake as all the people here know each other very well.”

Valestein turned to the refugees, ignoring how some of them had their guns out but pointed to the ground.

“Hear me, people of the Celdic region. My name is Sara Valestein, and I am an A-rank adventurer in the employ of the town of Celdic. With me are C-ranked adventurers Jaune Arc and Fie. You can consider us Huntsmen if you would like.” She added hastily as a few of the younger people looked confused at the term.

“Anyway, we understand your predicament, but know that your safety is our number one priority.” She turned back to Stebens, “We have successfully eradicated the Grimm horde at the old quarry and the rest of the expedition should be here in less than an hour. I have orders from the Captain of the Guards for the garrison to open the gates and let the refugees in. I shall be responsible for the screening process.”

A lot of murmuring sounded out at that, many of it jubilant and ecstatic. Stebens sighed as he had no choice but to comply.

“Open the gates.”

T*A*M*S

Early evening, July 5th
Stables,

“Man, who would have thought shit could go down that bad?” A voice spoke from the next stall over.

“I know, right? Dammit, we should have listened to Valestein when she warned against throwing numbers at the Grimm. I knew it, man. I just knew it that emptying the garrison for an expedition while the Grand Market was underway would be a bad idea.” Another replied from the opposite stall.

“From a purely strategic position, it wasn’t a wrong decision. That horde would have attacked us in the open if we left it alone. We had the terrain advantage and it needed to be destroyed ASAP.” An older voice interjected.

“Yet, the issue was that Montgomery had left the defense of the town in the hands of amateur militia. For them, It’s bad enough that they were forced to stay long hours after their own hard day of work to protect the town from what they believe to be a non-existent threat. When was the last time Celdic saw any action?”

“It must have been a decade or something.” That was Rory, “I had just joined and we suffered a Grimm horde. Must have been similar in size to the one in the quarry, but we had two professional Huntsmen each leading a Beacon team, so it was a complete wipe out.”

Another voice piped up. “Still, Grimm attacks on the outlying villages and then the saboteur attacks? The Dust shop, the barracks, and the communication building; No Dust, no sleeping quarters, and no comms… Again! It’s a miracle that Odvin had decided to close shop early and that most of the remaining troops were either in the hospital or celebrating in the market, thus missing the explosions. This was very well planned, and me thinks that whoever did it must have had inside help.”

Jaune was busy brushing down Arthur as he listened to the Dragoons tend their horses and gossip over the events of the day. “It’s not at all difficult to slip in a spy or two in during the Grand Market. Too many visitors and tourists. Besides, we can still contact Beacon through our Scrolls. Do we have an estimate on when the comms will be replaced?” He asked his stall neighbor.

“We will have to wait for supplies from Vale, and considering the last we heard was that Martial Law was still in place, we shouldn’t expect any until at least the end of the month.” Duncan scratched his chin thoughtfully. “On the bright side, we know an SDC train should be here by dawn. The tower repair crew have been itching to return for a while now.”

“Oh? What’s it carrying?”

“The usual. Dust, supplies, ammo. Its destination is Vale, but it stops here to pick up whoever is done with their business, unload a shipment of Dust to Odvin’s, then continue on their route. Let’s just hope they don’t panic when they contact the station and receive static instead. Not like they can turn around anyway.” He added with a wry chuckle that was echoed by his friends.

Jaune brushed the last strand of loose hair from his equine companion, patted him on the neck, then moved to Fie’s horse.

“I thought the Grand Market would last a couple more days?”

“Usually, it would,” Rory answered as he was done with his horse. “I could help you with Valestien’s horse if you would like?”

“Please and thank you.” Jaune smiled at the affable man and they worked in silence for a moment before Rory continued.

“As I was saying, the current situation of the region, what with reports of attacked villages and towns, as well as the war in Vale, must have scared off most of the visitors. Many of the merchants have packed up and nearly all the tourists are waiting for the train to return to Vale. I hear some fools pooled their money to buy Old Baha’s truck to drive all the way there. That senile old coot; he promised to reserve that rust-bucket for me.”

“I see.” Jaune snickered at his friend’s annoyance, “Well, I’m glad I *volunteered* to tend the horses for Sara and Fie. Let them deal with the mayor and the thousands of people trying to cram into town.”

They chuckled and worked in a comfortable mood for a while, engaging in small talk, teasing Rory about delaying his wedding with Lizzie again, or the other dragoons what they think will happen to Montgomery after this debacle.

“He might have led the defense well against the Sulfur Fish swarm, but it does not negate the fact that this entire expedition was due to those fools he keeps around goading him into action.”

Many of the dragoons murmured in agreement. Jaune patted Fie's horse once he was done, just as Rory finished tending to Sara's horse.

"Hey Arc." He turned to Duncan, who had another dragoon help him carry a large wooden box.

"Yeah?"

"This is a little something that the men decided to gift their *Radiant Blademaster*."

"Oh, come on, you're still calling me that?" Jaune scratched his head in embarrassment. Ever since they had seen him take out the Geist with an Aura strike, and then help dig a trench into the bedrock to bury their dead comrades, they had been calling him that. He wouldn't have minded if it was a nod to his sword skills, but it was mostly a joke on how he used *Crocea Mors* to shape the Aura he imbued in it into practical tools.

Like a shovel.

"What can I say, Arc? Even to blind rats like us when it comes to Aura sensing, we could just feel your existence somehow. You might need to look into proper ways to conceal yourself, or else you would be a shining beacon once you leave town. I'm surprised you weren't attacked at all on the way here."

"Must be because the roads were already cleared." He nodded to Duncan as he helped them lower the box.

"So what's this?"

"This," Rory spoke from behind him as he held a crowbar and jammed it at one end of the box, "is something we had in storage and decided your horse might need it soon."

With a grunt, he opened the box, revealing a full barding set. There was a shaffron, a crinet, a peytral, flanchards, and a crupper. It was bland and steely gray, and there were a few old dents and rusts all over it.

It was brilliant!

"This is amazing!" Jaune's eyes shined at the equipment. "Thanks guys."

"Don't sweat it. We stopped arming our horses with those once we fully adopted our guns into our combat style. Their Aura alone should be enough, most of the time. We also got you a breastplate, greaves, and bracers just like the ones we wear, but you'll have to pick it up from the armory."

The aspiring huntsman turned to the gathered crowd of dragoons. All of them had witnessed him fighting alongside them on the road, and even if they missed his performance in the quarry itself,

they had seen its aftereffects. They all nodded approvingly, eyes full of respect, and Jaune felt something he had never known he had craved before.

Acknowledgement, of his skills, at least, instead of his name.

“I will make sure to put it to good use. You hear that, Arthur? We’ll make a warhorse out of you yet.”

The horse snorted, causing them all to laugh.

T*A*M*S

Evening

Jaune stretched as he left the stables, the swinging of the empty Dust crystal around his neck grabbing his attention. He held the crystal with a frown, once again noticing the energy within it. Ever since his Aura fully recovered this morning, the crystal had slowly been feeding off the excess Aura he had.

An **Observe** told him all he needed.

Dust Crystal?
AP:2400/?
?

Jaune sent an Aura thread into it and found he could easily use the Aura within. That made sense, as it was *his* Aura the crystal was hoarding.

He shrugged as he placed it back under his shirt, more Aura was never a bad thing. He looked at the surrounding town, Celdic had turned into a refugee camp once all the troops returned. Montgomery had seemed like a changed man as he took charge of the situation with the backing of Brocket and Sara. It would have been easy to blame him for the mess, but it would have left a bad taste in his mouth. The man understood his mistake and endeavored to redeem himself. They also needed to provide a unified front for the people of Celdic, especially in these hard times.

Jaune walked towards the Grand Market, its location easily seen from distance thanks to the tall water tower next to it. Idly, he noticed the many tents that had sprung up in the formerly empty parks. The festival had to be closed prematurely but it was still considered a success… for the most part. Some of the merchants who had rented out for the rest of the week will have lost many potential profits, and he wagered Celdic itself will have difficulty inviting foreign merchants again.

For tonight, however, the festival was in full swing as the final day closed. Many people celebrated their lives and the coming harvest, despite the hardships they faced. Jaune thought the people of Celdic were a hardy folk who would not let themselves succumb to adversity.

If he wanted to buy any gifts for his family, now would be the best chance. Perhaps he should see if he could call them again later tonight? The aspiring huntsman looked at the half moon in the cloudy skies. He frowned as he wondered what kind of omen would that be.

He greeted the familiar form of Lizzie and her ceramics shop, who was playing patty cake with Anita, Duncan's daughter. Jaune stopped and spoke to them for a while, and was shocked to learn that Elizabeth was Lieutenant Brocket's daughter. Considering he saw him speaking amiable with Rory, he assumed the Lieutenant was supporting of their relationship. So why weren't they married yet?

"We're just waiting for the right time. Celdic is dear to my heart, and I know we're getting up in the years, but I hoped Rory would move with me to Vale." Lizzie answered with a wan smile.

"Looking for the safety of the big city, huh?" Jaune gave her a knowing look, as he held Anita on his shoulders. The little tyke might have acted like a proper lady when he first met her, but she quickly showed her true self once she got used to him. He didn't mind, he had always wanted younger siblings and Fie was nowhere in sight to pout at him.

"Yep, even if it must be even more crowded than Celdic right now, with the refugees and displaced people from the war." The older woman giggled lightly as she threw a rubber ball to Anita who missed, causing it to bounce on Jaune's head.

"Sorry, uncle!"

"U-uncle?" Jaune spluttered as he placed the girl down. Did he look that old? A glance at the giggling girl had him narrowing his eyes at the cheek.

"Are you heading over to Meg's?"

"Oh? I didn't know you two were friends?"

"She always makes sure to visit every season and brings interesting things to sell." Lizzie shrugged and Jaune scratched his chin in thought.

They spoke for a couple of more minutes before Lizzie had to close shop and take Anita back to her father. Jaune waved farewell and then continued his stroll, stopped by a fruit stall and bought himself a bag of oranges to snack on before he made his way to Meg's. On the way, he found Fie staring in wonder at a cotton candy stall.

"Hey Fie," her tail twitched as she turned to him with pleading eyes. Jaune chuckled as he had a sense of déjà vu.

"Still broke? I thought you mentioned you had an emergency fund in your room." Jaune thanked the vendor as he paid him for a few sticks of cotton candy.

The cat girl grabbed two and munched on the first in delight as they walked, while he peeled his orange. “Mhmm, had to replenish my ammo and bomb supplies. Dust is an important ingredient for most explosives, but there are plenty of other materials involved.”

“I see. Good thing I still have some Dust on me, now that Odvin’s a bust, eh?” Fie nodded, her cheeks full of candy, causing him to chortle. “Where's Sara, by the way?”

“Still overseeing the defenses with the garrison. She sent me away a while ago and said to meet her in the Inn in the evening. Something about me needing to have fun or something.”

Jaune hummed as the girl finished the first stick and quickly moved onto the next.

“So, explosives.” He looked pointedly at Fie, who was engrossed in her snack, waiting for her to say something.

The white-haired cat-faunus quickly gulped her treat before turning to him with one finger raised, “Lesson one when handling bombs; safety.”

Jaune had to hold in a chuckle as he watched her serious face flecked with blue cotton candy. He silently produced a handkerchief from **Storage** and wiped her face clean, much to her chagrin.

“With my Aura reserves, I doubt I'll need to worry about safety.”

Fie shook her head vehemently, “And what if you don't have Aura but still need to work on explosives? Did you forget how you spent the last few days as Auraless as a gnat? You have to take this seriously, Jaune. If you want me to teach you, then listen closely.”

The blonde man was taken aback, and grimaced inwardly at the blunt truth. Jaune was allowing his arrogance to seep back into his thoughts, and that would not do. He nodded genially to the girl, “You got it, Fie. Let's finish our shopping and head back to the inn for our lessons.”

They first visited Meg's where they found her on a laptop connected to a video camera. A glance showed that she had most of her merchandise packed, but Jaune’s gaze fell on a disassembled machine gun on a table but didn’t have the chance to look closer when the older woman noticed them.

“Oh, howdy! I heard you were back. How was your mission, Jaune? Did you test the gun?”

“It went well. The gun was helpful, but I miss having a shield.” Jaune looked strangely at what she was doing. He was knowledgeable enough with tech to know that she was doing video editing, but he wasn’t as much of a tech whiz as his sisters. “So, what are you up to?”

“Oh, this? I’ve been taking videos of the Grand Market to show to a magazine back in Vale. The mayor loved the idea of more exposure for the town and allowed me to take as many shots as possible.” The rabbit-woman then pointed to the back of the tent, where some strange device with

rotary blades and another camera was strapped to. “I even got to use my drone for an aerial shot. It’s a shame what’s going to happen, though.”

Drone? Jaune filed it for later and looked around at the emptying store, “Planning to leave early?”

Meg gave a wan smile, “Unfortunately yes. While I did enjoy my time here and earned a tidy profit, I can tell that something big will happen to this town soon. I'll be taking the SDC train in the morning back to Vale.”

“I see. Well, hopefully I'll see you safe in Vale once I'm done here. Could we still browse what you have in stock right now?”

“Sure! Tell me what you or your friend need, but my gun isn’t for sale.” She pointed at the disassembled gun before smiling warmly at Fie who was browsing a shelf of powdered substances, “Careful sweetie. That thing can blow your fingers off.”

Fie gave her a peace sign and a not so innocent smile, “I'll take all you have. Jaune's paying.”

He should have known.

.

.

.

They made their way back to the Inn, heavily laden with supplies, though thankfully, it was all stored in **Storage**. Jaune may have jokingly grumbled about having to pay for most of it, but he didn’t really mind as whatever he managed to make would be his, as Fie still had her own explosives stored in the inn room.

He really hoped the proprietress didn’t do random checks and if she did, she wouldn’t be stupid enough to mess with bombs.

They entered the inn to see it jam-packed with people. There were the regular guests, of course, but there were also a large crowd of morose people. Those who have lost their homes, their livelihoods, and probably friends and families to the Grimm. It made Jaune’s blood boil, and he felt restless knowing that the Grimm were out there. Most likely, congregating around a more experienced Grimm, or getting baited by those mysterious bandits, before they made their next move.

At least, the residents of Celdic had easily taken them in, imbibing them with bitter ale and good food to lighten the mood – some of the refugees appeared to be feeling better as they joked and laughed lightly with the locals. Jaune also noticed that everyone had a gun on their hip.

They were surprised to find Sara sitting by an empty side of the bar, a mug of beer in hand. She waved them over, and Jaune noticed she had her scroll expanded to tablet mode. It seemed the older Adventurer was waiting for a call, as the screen had *connecting* written over it.

“There you are, kids. Come over, and grab a drink.”

“No, thanks. We’ll be playing with explosives in the room, Sara. I’d rather keep Jaune sober for that.”

“Excuse me? Explosives? What are you teaching those kids, Valestein?”

Jaune frowned at the open scroll, slightly annoyed at the patronizing tone. He was greeted by a pretty yet severe-looking blonde woman with green eyes and spectacles. He thought the woman would have been beautiful if not for her stern look.

“Who are you?”

“Ah, Glynda. You finally answered. So, introductions.” Sara moved away from the counter to give them full view of the Scroll, “Fie, Jaune. Meet Glynda Goodwitch. Combat instructor in Beacon academy and the Deputy Headmistress. She is also technically our employer.”

“Is that so. A pleasure to meet you, then, Professor. I will be in your care in a few weeks when I enroll.” Jaune’s frown disappeared, yet he maintained a stoic look and inclined his head politely.

The blonde woman kept her stern look, though Jaune was starting to think that was her normal face.

“Don’t worry, Glynda. Fie is a pro, and Jaune can handle himself quite well. I should know, things would have gotten sticky if not for him.”

The woman finally nodded, *“It is not my place to warn you to be careful, I suppose. Not yet, at least.”* She gave a slight smirk at Jaune who raised an eyebrow. “*Regardless, I need a full report of what has happened in the past twenty-four hours, Sara.”*

“Do you need us here, Sara?” Fie was stealing glances at the upper floor where their room was.

“Nah, you can go have your fun, Kiddos. Don’t blow the up inn, though.”

***

Fie dragged him off to their room and quickly cleared up the table before covering it with a tarp and placing vials of substances from her **Storage**.

“I’m really liking this ability.”

Jaune smirked before having a sudden thought.

“You know, my sister Maya is quite the savant when it comes to tinkering and creating things. Wanna meet her?”

Fie froze hesitantly, “If she’s cool like you…”

“Don’t worry.” He patted her head, preening inwardly at being called *cool*. “You’ll love her.”

He set up his scroll and called his sister. It was unfortunate that his scroll didn’t have a video call feature, but at least he could show Fie his sister through her camera.

It took a few minutes, in which Jaune helped Fie finish setting up her stuff, before the call connected.

“Hello? Who keeps calling without their camera on? Is that you, Jaune?”

“Hey, Maya.” Jaune laughed as he looked at his sister. She looked cleaner and more organized than yesterday, though he could see a small smidgen of oil on her brow. “Yeah, it's me. Where are you?”

“On my way to Celdic, believe it or not.”

“Really? Whatever for?” Jaune would have been shocked if he hadn’t used the scrying bowl to spy on them. Although, he’s surprised Dad would send the twins, instead of an executive of the company.

“Hyperion and Arc family business. You of all people should know about it.” She intoned knowingly, “*Bleue says hi, by the way.”*

“Hello, Jaune.” Another, more cultured, voice spoke, though no less warm. *“It’s been a while since we've spoken. Sorry, I can’t move into the camera at the moment, I’m a little busy flying this behemoth.”*

“That it has, Bleue. Anyway, I’d like to introduce you to a friend of mine. Fie, say hello to my sisters Maya and Bleue. They’re one year older than me, but I consider them to be my best friends.”

“…hello.”

“Oh my Gosh!! Did you hear that, Bleue? Jaune has made a friend! A friend who is a girl!! Mom will be so ecstatic.”

Maya certainly looked a little *too* happy, and Jaune shuddered as he watched the wide grin appearing on her face. He wasn’t sure if not having a camera was a good thing or not.

“Oh my, Jaune. You certainly have been busy. And such a cute sounding girl as well.”

Fie shifted awkwardly as a blush formed on her face.

“Come on, girls. Knock it off, you’re making Fie uncomfortable.”

“Sorry/My apologies.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Fie shook her head and then remained silent. Jaune gave her a light bump with his waist as she stood next to him and mouthed for her to say something. The girl pouted before turning to the Scroll, “What’s that you mentioned about a behemoth?”

“Oh yeah, Dad sent us along with a survey team, and an executive of Uncle John’s with a couple of Sparrow escorts to Celdic for some business with the town and Vale. Uncle had us take one of his newest aircraft for a test run.”

“Uncle?” Fie questioned as she set the last of her equipment.

“Johannes Lichter is my Dad’s younger brother. Full-time CEO of Hyperion corporation, and part-time mad scientist.”

“Unlike our father, who is a full-time mad scientist.”

They chuckled at Bleue’s remark. She might be the calm and polite twin, but Jaune could easily confess that she had the best timing for jokes among his sisters, especially her dry sense of humor.

“Well, I’m glad you are on the way. The situation in Celdic had changed drastically, since we last talked.”

“What happened, Jaune?”

The mood seemed to fall as Maya asked in concern.

“A lot of things. Might as well get comfy. Oh, and Fie? Work on the bombs. I’ll watch and learn.”

Fie nodded and busied herself with her toys.

“Oh, explosives? Girl, you’re gonna fit right in with us. Now I have to meet you.”

“Wait… you’re also into explosives?”

“What do you mean, Jaune?” Bleue’s smooth voice sounded from offscreen. *“Every gal has a few explosives hidden somewhere on her person. One can never be too careful with Grimm and outlaws, after all.”*

The youngest Arc facepalmed as Fie beamed with *two* peace signs instead of her usual one. “You were right, Jaune. Your sisters are *super* cool.”

T*A*M*S

Unknown location, late evening.

A sleek gray Bullhead flew at a low altitude over the hills. Its destination was a hidden valley, which at any other time would look beautiful and serene. Now, however, it looked anything but that, with thousands of Grimm coloring the normally green valley black.

Inside the Bullhead, a pink-haired man in the pilot seat had a nervous grin on his face as he approached the valley. Beside him, in the co-pilot seat, was a short mousy man fiddling with a strange black device.

“Hey, Shiro.” The now named Shiro grunted without looking at his co-pilot. “Just to confirm, we just need to activate this once we are near the town, right?”

“Yes, you idiot.” Shiro growled, “and leave the damn thing! Who told you to touch it?”

The mousy man flinched and nearly dropped the black device on the ground, if not for Shiro’s quick reflexes. The pink-haired man stopped the VTOL aircraft right before the entrance of the valley, and slowly glared at the man.

“Do you wanna die, bitch? Is that it, Bors? You have any idea how fucked we would be if we turned this shit on too soon? Or worse, broke it?”

“N-no, Shi– I mean, boss.”

“Then be fucking careful, you retard. I’ll kill you and cut you into sashimi for the boss lady to feast on!” The ill-tempered man roared as he placed the device back on the dashboard where his shifty co-pilot had taken it.

“Kid is waking up.” A voice sounded from deeper inside the aircraft. “Might want to get a move on before the Grimm start chasing us.”

Shiro turned to the formerly sleeping Grimm bait, to find the boy he kidnapped with Trifa tied up and gagged in spider silk, glaring murderously at him.

“What’s this? Did sleeping beauty finally awaken?” The pink haired man left his seat and squatted in front of the brown haired youth, grabbing him by the head and smirking at him. “Yer angry, eh? That’s good, that’s good. Who would have thought you would unlock your Aura so quickly.”

Shiro squeezed the brat’s head harshly as he stared right into his slitted pupils, “Who would have thought the quiet little snake would be the tough one, eh?” A deranged cackle sounded out from him as the boy struggled futilely against his bonds, “Don’t get ahead of yourself, kid. You might have Aura now, but you're only fucking ten. Or was it twelve?”

“Thirteen actually.”

“I don’t fucking care, he’s still a runt.”

The boy’s captors cackled. Unbeknownst to Shiro, his co-pilot, Bors, took that opportunity to fiddle with the black device again.

“Your only purpose is to be angry, to hate me, to *detest* me. The more you do, the better, for that’s all you can do as you struggle pathetically against your fate.”

Tears started forming around the boy’s eyes, yet his struggles never ceased. Muffled grunts and growls could be heard from his gagged mouth, his snake eyes, glaring so evilly that if looks could kill, Shiro would be dead a thousand times over. Unfortunately, It only drove his captors to laugh further at the useless effort.

“You are a cowardly weakling, *Jasper*.” It was Trifa who whispered softly in his ears, which caused the boy to freeze in terror. “Poor, *poor*, Petunia. She oh so desperately wanted her friend to save her. Alas, you couldn’t even look her in the eye, could you, Jasper? Not after what we did to her. You are a snake in the grass hiding from danger, yet you could do nothing but writhe like a worm once you are caught.”

The growling and grunts from earlier quickly turned into sobs and mewls of despair. Trifa giggled like a girl in a candy shop, her eyes widening and her irises dilating, while Shiro mock-scowled.

“How come he’s terrified of you, and only angry at me?”

“What can I say? A spider knows how to *toy* with its prey.”

Before they could continue their banter, the Bullhead shook violently all of a sudden, causing Shiro and Trifa to hold onto the walls. There was a clattering sound and Shiro felt static in the air as his hair slightly stood up.

“What the fuck?” He turned to the co-pilot, only to find him looking terrified at the ground… Where the Black Device had an ominous red light glowing from its single bulb.

“What did you do, you fucking moron!” The pink haired man grabbed the co-pilot and threw him away from the controls before jumping into his seat. It only took him a second to realize what caused the Bullhead to shake.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, FUCK! This is too early.” Thousands of Grimm were funneling out of the valley and glared murderously at the aircraft. One of them, a Beringel, had a large rock in its hand as it prepared to launch it at them. Shiro quickly evaded and flew away, dragging the entire horde behind them. He tried to use his comms but not even static would sound, causing him to slam the mic in frustration.

“I-I’m s-sorry, I couldn’t help it.” The whimpering co-pilot sniffed, and Shiro saw the remains of white powder on his whiskered upper lip.

“You son of a BITCH!” He drew his gun and shot the fool who had snorted coke during such an important mission. The rat-faunus squealed in pain, as his Aura flickered, unable to fully protect him, and a large bruise formed on his shoulder.

“I should kill you, Bors. But with how fucked up the situation is, we’re gonna need every moron with Aura on hand. Bring me that damn thing, and get out of my face!”

Bors nodded fearfully, and hurried to follow orders before scampering to the small cargo hold.

“Can’t we turn it off?” Trifa asked as she made sure Jasper was bound.

“No. We’re fucked. *‘No comms for a hundred miles of where the device is active’* is what that fucker told us. The thing is a relic given to us by that fucker Watts. He doesn’t even know how it works, claiming to have found it in some ruin and got bored with it.”

“What does this mean to the operation?”

“It means that we won’t know if your retard friend you call Elder, or Walter, or whatever the fuck his name is, will be able to tell us whether they managed to hijack the train or not.” Shiro’s manic grin returned, “Nothing to do about it, we’re still committed to the plan. Whether the White Fang succeeded or not was always just a bonus to us. It was part of the deal we had with Watts, make your bullheaded friend feel ingratiated for some reason as a favor to another of his band of loonies. The problem is that everyone in the entire region will know something is wrong once communication is down.”

Shiro gulped heavily, “Including Ravena.”

A nervous mood settled in the Bullhead as it flew towards the town of Celdic, thousands of Grimm hot on its tail.

T*A*M*S

At the same time, in Celdic.

Sara hurried up the steps of the Weathercock Inn and opened the door to their inn room.

“Hey, did you lose connection, too?”

Jaune was fiddling with the scroll as it went blank with a *No Connection* typed on the screen in red.

“Yeah. We were speaking with my sisters when the connection died. Were you still talking to that lady all that time?”

“I was talking to Kilika actually,” Sara shook her head. “Standard bookkeeping stuff and reports. Fie? Your scroll?”

The girl, who was packing the results of the past few hours of work into a pile for Jaune to store, whipped out her Scroll and tried a call. After a couple of tries, she shook her head.

“Nothing, huh? Damn. I can’t even connect to the short wave frequency and call Brocket.”

Sara bit on her thumb in thought before coming to a decision. “Alright kids, I hope you weren’t getting ready for a nap because it looks like we might have a long night ahead of us. Gear up, and follow me.”

Jaune quickly equipped his new armor set through clever use of **Storage**, to the appreciation of Sara.

“You gotta teach me how to do that.”

“Practice. Tell me if you need Dust.”

T*A*M*S

Somewhere far to the northeast.

Hundreds of men and women in black and white uniforms murmured to each other as they gathered in front of a large platform. They all had a red canine head with three vertical lines over it printed on the back of their shirts. It was late evening, and many of them were restless for the night to come. They knew there was a big operation to be had tonight, but not the details. Rumors abounded, from sacking a village, to attacking Vale itself.

A man, no, a Faunus, walked onto the platform. He was tall, muscular and had short cropped black hair, and wore a white Grimm mask with red paint. The murmurs increased as he made his way to the center and faced the crowd.

“It’s Elder Walter.”

“Attention!” Once everyone was silent, Walter continued. “Everyone, our leader, Adam Taurus.”

Another man walked onto the platform. He was also tall, with bullhorns peeking out of crimson red hair, and also wore a white Grimm mask with red markings.

“My fellow faunus, today is a day that will be etched in the annals of our history! We stand united, unwavering, as proud defenders of our race and our revolution. Our cause is just, our resolve unyielding, and our hearts aflame with hatred at our human oppressors. Long have we suffered at their hands, and long we shall suffer so long as we remain meek and pliant to their whims. But, no longer.”

The crowd seemed to be holding their breaths.

“Today, my fellow faunus, we'll show the humans what we're made of! For too long have they oppressed us, trampled on our rights, and treated us as animals. But no more! We are not their pets, we are not their playthings – we are warriors, and we will fight for our rightful place in the world! And if any of those filthy humans get in our way, then they'll learn the hard way that we cannot be stopped. So raise your arms, my brothers and sisters, and let's show them our defiance!”

Men and women roared their defiance.

“Our resolve.”

Men and women roared their resolve.

“OUR HATRED!”

The cacophony and the sheer hatred that was embedded into the crowd would have attracted many Grimm if they had not cleared the area beforehand.

It took a while for the crowd to calm down before Taurus spoke again.

“Tonight, our first major mission in Vale shall commence. A train, owned by the vilest of our oppressors, the Schnees, is bound for the city of Vale. Our patriotic comrades risked their lives and livelihoods to get us this information. That train is full of weapons and supplies; of Dust mined by enslaved Faunus to be spent frivolously for the Human scum of Vale. We shall reclaim the contents of that train, as our rightful reparation for all that we suffered. We shall properly arm ourselves, and have enough supplies to thrive in the wilderness of Vale as we continue our just war against the oppressors.”

More roars of glee and support sounded out, causing Taurus to grin.

“Once we take that train, we shall continue onwards to the first target of our hatred. A human town called Celdic is along the route to Vale. I hear it is rich and its residents have grown fat and lazy. No doubt through the exploitation of our fellow faunus. We shall sack the town for what it's worth, and then, the humans shall learn to fear us.”

“Kill the humans!”

“We shall drink their wine and feast over their corpses.”

“Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill!”

In a corner of a tent, a black haired cat-faunus looked forlorn at the scene in front of her, a piece of paper clenched tightly in her hand. Her amber eyes looked burdened and heavy with guilt. Her cat ears flopped in sadness.

Sorry for the cliffhanger, but I will see you in a month.

The Bandit's plan was complicated, and we all know how the plans of mice and men go.

Yes, I am hijacking the Black Trailer. Blake will not just get a sudden change of heart, as if she had not seen the atrocities Adam committed over the past few years.

Want to read three chapters ahead? You know where to find me.