

Hey all, four days late but here is the next installment of Semblance of Hope (yes, Semblance, not Stallion LOL). It isn't all that funny a chapter, but it is a necessary one prior to the real action in the next episodes. Hiryo has looked it over, but I have not looked it over with Grammarly. Sorry, still edit-shy after work on Chapter 49 and Grammarling the two chapters from last night.

Episode 7, Chapter 22: Long Way Round

After conferring with Jaune, Ranma left the rest of the group in a nearby hiding place, heading out to see if he could find a high spot to observe the new valley and the very distant sight of Spartoi. Even with the spyglass, the distant city was more of a haze on the horizon than anything else. Only its angular nature showed it was something unnatural. However, Ranma wasn't interested in the city. Rather, the area around it. That problem was why the band had stopped here in the scrub forest around one of the valley entrances.

Returning back to the others, Ranma explained the terrain he had seen. "It is much like what we were told to expect. The city seems to be surrounded by flat, which segues--"

"Ooh, you said a big word!" Nora teased as she cut in.

"That wasn't isn't even a big word, what goes on your mind sometimes, I swear, pancake lover," Ranma shot back, waving her off as he repeated the word. "Which segues into a swamp to one side of the valley. I've got no idea how far it goes, but it is about the only cover that I could see."

"Unless we double back, take to the mountains again and skirt around the Valley?" Jaune guessed frowning. "I really don't think we want to chance the flatlands not unless the weather gets really bad. And the river is supposed to be infested with Crocernauts."

Crocernauts were crocodile-like Grimm who, despite not being very fast when on land and thus avoidable, were known for their immensely powerful bite and their armor so no one wanted to tangle with them. Luckily they preferred moving water, and clear water too for some reason Jaune had no idea of.

The others all nodded, and the blonde leader of team JNPR continued to question Ranma, both about the terrain, and what he thought about taking back into the mountains. Ranma would've been fine with that idea, if he was alone, but they were running out of food supplies, and it was undoubted that doing so would take them far longer than trying to make for the distant Spartoi. "So, we have to take to the swamps. What about Grimm? What have

you seen of them both out on the plains and in the swamp? Most Grimm in swamps are of the small variety but still..."

"There are some horse types out there, they seem to move in herds. And there are a few flying types I spotted, although not nearly as many as I would've expected. They also don't seem to roost in the city itself, which is weird. What isn't weird, is that they seem to avoid the swamp too. If we double back and try to move through the mountains we'll run into more flight type Grimm than if we make to the swamp. I would wager though that we could get to the swamp in a single night if we push it."

"Will have to," Jaune announced decisively, looking up at the sun high above, which was slowly moving into evening tide. "We'll do it tonight. Let's have a big meal, and all of us can put down for a few hours before we move. But I want us in the swamps before morning. Ranma, have you ever moved through swamplands?"

Thinking that the younger man had come along way, Ranma answered in the negative. He'd moved through similar environments, in a few ways and had some information to share. That was better than the others had, although all of them jeered at Ranma good-naturedly when he suggested that they always take to the trees, and Pyrrha tussled his hair affectionately saying, "Well of course you would say that. I often wonder if your aerial style should be renamed into monkey style."

"Ah, but I only 'ook-ook' for you..." Ranma trailed off, frowning.

"No," Pyrrha shook her head, with Nora and Jaune making 'booooo' noises in the background.

"Yeah, knew it as soon as I said it. Ooh, how about, but I only want to climb y... no." Ranma broke off at the look Pyrrha was giving him, a mix of incredulity, eyerolling and blushing all at once. "Meh, I'll work on it. Let's get a move on team."

They broke out of the old valley that night, shifting along the leftmost edge as they exited the large valley, heading around the city rather than directly there. As Ranma had said, the grassland gave way to swampland, a miniature jungle in effect at the leftmost edge of the valley circling around that zone to the other side of the valley.

Ren took the lead with Ranma taking tail end Charlie, making sure that they weren't leaving any hint they were there. At this point that was necessary. Even Nora knew that silence was paramount. Necessary too was the makeshift ghillie suits they wore. Once more there were Grimm in the skies, and although few in number, the humans could not afford to be spotted by any.

They were forced to double back twice, when Ren halted in place, moving back to the rest of the team, gesturing them to crouch down low his aura enveloping them. There were

groups of horse-like Grimm moving around even in the dark, and while their eyesight and weapons weren't much, their speed made them dangerous. But thankfully the ghillie-suits and Ren's Semblance did their work, blinding the Grimm to their presence. But eventually, the team of five found themselves at the edge of the swamp.

"Hope everyone remembered some bug repellent," Jaune whispered weakly, staring into the morass ahead of them. Even with the light of the fractured moon above, they could tell the ground underneath trees of the kind he'd never seen before, intermingled with a lot of underbrush, was not in fact solid.

This was shown a moment later as Nora tossed a small pebble forward towards what looked like a bit of grass. Instead, the stone disappeared within the grass with a *plunk* sound.

"Into the trees," Ranma ordered, gesturing with his hands. "Nora, I'll want you up last. And give me your grenade rounds, I'll put them in my ki space."

She blinked and began to open her mouth in protest. But Jaune agreed, moving over to boost Ren up into the trees, while Pyrrha was able to make her own way up with single leap. "Your grenade launcher is too loud. The noise will carry way too far. If we're attacked, you're going to have to be in close-range combat like me and Ranma.

"Actually, we'll be," Pyrrha murmured thinking. "Only Ren of all of us should be using his guns. We've conserved more ammo so far, but we still don't have any idea how many Grimm we'll run into the city."

Ranma nodded, and Nora, pouting, obeyed. Moments later all of them were up in the trees, and Ranma found himself looking up at Pyrrha as she leaned down from an upper bough, her long hair falling down along one side of her face. "Hello," she said, smiling a little at him, her eyes shining.

Ranma smiled back, leading up quickly to give her a kiss on the cheek. "Hey yourself."

Jaune and Nora made gagging noises and Ranma snorted, looking over at Ren. "Have you recovered enough of your Aura to keep using your Semblance?"

Ren was about to nod, but Nora smacked her shoulder against his, looking at him with a scowl as and he changed the nod into a headshake, a certain resigned look to his eyes. "No, not yet."

Ranma nodded, and gestured him to the trees. "We still need to put more distance between us and the edge of the swamp. Go slow, go quiet."

The group made their way forward through the trees of the swamp, with JNPR becoming more grateful than ever for Aura, as it meant that the bugs bite at them couldn't get

through. For his part Ranma simply ignored them, the creatures unable to get through his skin despite the fact he couldn't use Aura like the others. That removed a large part of the issues with traveling through a swamp like this. Although of course, staying to the trees as they did also had issues, in the main, being that they had to be on the lookout for Grimm within the trees just as much is on the ground. Despite Nora's protests, Ren's Semblance got a lot of work those first few hours in the dark, until they found a spot they could rest, where Ren collapsed into sleep against Nora's shoulder.

With dawn they spotted several different types of Grimm in the trees. Snakes, small bird types, and even, at one point, a small, strange lizard-like Grimm, which Ranma was certain had spotted them before Ren had a chance to activate his aura to defend them. But it made no move to follow or attack.

"I guess Grimm can be just as lazy as humans. It doesn't seem to care about us," Jaune mused, frowning.

Ranma shrugged his shoulders. "That, or it was smart enough to not like its chances. Some Grimm are smart like that and you can never tell by their size."

As they moved silently, they did occasionally have to leave the trees, moving forward through the water. Then, Ranma would take the plunge first, seeing how the water was, using his ki space to carry their weapons so they wouldn't get wet with the sole exception of Jaune's blade. Ranma would then carry Ren and Pyrrha, the two with the best eyes. Carrying Ren also let him concentrate on his Semblance better. Nora moved between them, making her own way, Jaune's sword in hand as she swished it underneath, making sure that there was nothing in her way and that if anything attacked them, she would be ready for it.

It was not pleasant going, and twice they were attacked by small Grimm fish, which seemed to be an unholy mix of piranha and frog that Ranma had never heard of. Thankfully they couldn't bite straight through Ranma, Nora or Jaune's Aura, although Nora did have to take a few breaks to let her Aura recover. And more often than not it was Nora who had to fend them off with Jaune's sword, muttering all the while about how she wished she could use her weapon.

The second time they were attacked Ranma allowed it, giving Nora Magnhild back. Holding the warhammer-grenade launcher under the water, she fired the grenade directly downward at her own feet before hopping upwards pushing as much of her body out of the swamp as she could.

Ranma had put all three of the others on his shoulders before this, in order to avoid the shockwaves. But Ranma saw Nora grimace as the reverberations through the water.

"Are you alright?" Ren asked quickly, reaching down from his perch on Ranma's back.

"I'm okay," Nora grumbled, looking a little groggy. But she glared up at Ranma. "See, the noise didn't carry, you big meanie."

"Maybe, but the next time you do that, let's see if we can plan it out a little better so you can get you out of the water ahead of time," Ranma said, leaning over to help her stand up, Ren still perched on his back. The next day, they spotted the first technically S-class seems to and Ranma scowled, handing over some money to Jaune. "Dammit, I was certain it would be a snake-type."

"All snake types grow too large to really be able to move around swamps like this easily. They normally have to move to forests or planes," Jaune said firmly. "Sorry, your theory of there being a secondary evolution doesn't really hold water."

"Yeah, yeah, laugh it up," Ranma muttered, staring at the small segment of the swamp ahead of them where a human-sized frog Grimm rested in the sun, its eyes closed as it enjoyed the sun. It was as large across as Yatsushashi, squat with a huge mouth. Its bulk seemed mostly head, covered by the red-lined white bone armor. It had two mouths, one small, one wide, both marked by serrated edges. Out of the larger mouth a tongue was lolling out, every few inches of which was edged with spikes. Its four limbs ended in webbed feet, clawed tips digging lightly into the moss underneath him.

On its back, were large bulbous looking wart, which Ranma knew from reading about them that could spawn other frog Grimm. As he and Jaune moved back to the rest of the team, Ranma went over what he knew about this Grimm, which was called a Bull Roarer, formulating a plan. By the time it reached the others, they had the makings of an idea.

"We found an S-class Grimm, it's a Bull Roarer, which means we need to shut up its second mouth quickly. If it gets out one of its croaks, we'll be swamped by Grimm," Ranma began, only to cut off as a chorus of groans. Thinking about his words, he paled, his hands waving in front of his face. "Wait, I didn't mean it as a pun! I am so sorry!"

"Credibility dropping to zero," Nora groaned, shaking her head, pointing at Jaune. "You go fearless leader."

"Er, right. Anyway, its croaks are the main issue, along with the warts on its back," Jaune took over with a grin. "As for his punishment I think we will have Ranma go out and find us an ambush point and a deer. Then, when it comes after us, we take it from on high. It doesn't have any armor on the back between the warts and you can ignore its Grimm helmet too."

"I think there was a place we passed by ten minutes or so ago." Hangdog, Ranma moved off, but he brightened as Pyrrha joined him. The two of them moved through the branches of the trees, moving carefully and on the lookout for Grimm with every leap.

That night, with the position having been chosen, Ranma headed out onto the grassy plain, and was able to hunt down a deer. The horse Grimm, like most Grimm who looked like animals shared traits with that animal. That meant the horse Grimm were not meat eaters, so had not bothered the deer here. That lack of hunting and the size of the grazing area had allowed the deer herds to increase to an incredible size and had caused the deer to not even recognize danger until too late.

Ranma returned to the swamp with the unconscious deer on his back. Not ten minutes later, the team was ready. The deer was woken up by a general application of ki, releasing it down into the swamp. Its squeals of fright and thrashing around in the water brought the Bull Roarer towards it through the water, moving like a small island in the swamp. As it passed below a tree, Pyrrha hurled Jaune's sword like a spear, straight down slamming into the back of the Grimm with all of the power her semblance could give. That might not have been enough to penetrate the Grimm's armored back but it certainly penetrated enough to hold the sword there,

The Grimm stopped in place, its tongue moving like a living thing as it flashed up towards Pyrrha, who leaped away in shock.

The Grimm slowly turned, its real mouth opening to croak its horrible cry that would bring the Grimm down on them.

As Pyrrha leaped clear, Nora leaped down the trees with Magnhild in hand, a gleeful grin on her face as she brought it crashing down on the top pommel of Jaune's sword in a blow that echoed a little too loud to Ren's ears, and he watched the area warily. The sword penetrated deep into the creature's back, severing its spine and stabbing even deeper, finding whatever worked as a brain or something similar.

Ranma leaped forward, grabbing at the Grimm's second mouth and clamping it close, staring at it as spire disappearing down to the swamp even as it began to turn to dust

he then grabbed up the sword, cheerfully pulling Nora up onto the shoulders, where she leaped up into the willow, while Ren helped Pyrrha and Jaune.

Well, that was easy! We seriously need to figure out a way to make more weapons like your sword Jaune," Nora cackled. "Heck even I want one, and I'm a blunt object kind of gal."

"Heh, it's nice to know you're so self-aware, Nora," Jaune snorted, shaking her head. "But as for my sword, you saw how much effort Pyrrha's aunt had to put into even trying to warm it up. No one knows how to make steel like this these days."

"And remember all this might've been easy, but these S-class Grimm all have something going. If this critter had spotted us, we would never have gotten away, while still in the swamp. Do not become arrogant."

“This, coming from you?” Jaune shot back, a little stunned at the criticism.

“Yeah, me,” Ranma snorted. “Remember Jaune, I lived out in the Grimm Lands for a few years. I know precisely how many Grimm are out there.”

Pyrrha nodded seriously. “Further, we didn’t really fight this Grimm. We knew where and how to pray on its weakness, its aggressive stupidity. Bull Roarers have poison claws, they can be sneaky, and as Ranma says, we got very lucky spotting it, while it was sunning itself.

With the injunction to stay careful given, Ranma smiled. “All that said, good job troops. Now let’s get going we still got work to do.”

However, that was the last bit of swamp-based exercise that the group got and soon, they were able to see the far end of the swamp. They camped one last time that day in the swamp before breaking out up to the hills once more and from then up to the mountains, moving across them to the nearest point towards Spartoi. Eventually, they were able to find a spot where they were supposed to send up the beacon, informing everyone watching that they were in position.

This beacon was not a simple flare. It was a small drone designed to look like a hawk which when released would hover in the air, giving out a specific signal that would be picked up by the waiting teams of Hunters elsewhere. A Bullhead would then be sent in to make contact with the team, resupply them, and then pull back.

With Pyrrha watching for any flying Grimm, Ranma decided to get ready after all. There was a small waterfall to one side of the chosen area and Ranma worked diligently for much of the day tearing out chunks of stone using his bare hands most the time, which was great for toughness training, but not all that much fun. Nora helped, while Jaune went over Magnhild, and Ren scouted around. There didn’t seem to be any flying Grimm around, but no one was willing to take that as a given.

By the time evening fell, the small stream had a tiny pool set to one side and Ranma set up a tiny wooden wall. This he could use to redirect the water for a moment. It wasn’t much, but it was deep enough to get their bodies clean at least. He apologized as the others joined them by the tiny makeshift bath. “It’s not exactly the lap of luxury but given what all we have to work with it’s the best I can do.

Pyrrha just clapped her hands together. “After the last few days, getting clean sounds wonderful, regardless of the state of the bath. Thank you.”

That night once all of them were clean and presentable, the group went over their weapons, while Ranma stood watch before heading to bed.

“This trip has been good for one thing, it certainly made us all take onboard more about what we were taught back in Beacon about working as a team and removing any barriers between us,” Ren muttered to Nora, ruffling her hair. “There was a time when you wouldn’t want us to work with Magnhild as Jaune did earlier. Heck, you wouldn’t have been willing to partner with anyone but me.”

She licked at his hand, pouting at him. “Just because I, I don’t mind working together doesn’t mean you can throw that around Partner! You’re still my only partner, Renny.”

“Hmm, good to know I’ve got job security,” Ren answered with a smile, causing Nora’s pout to deepen even as she blushed.

Watching this, Pyrrha chuckled, while Ranma simply rolled his eyes. The two of them had bedded down for the night together under a small outcropping of rock, most of their bodies hidden under the outcropping, with Pyrrha curled up against Ranma’s back this time. She had wanted to try being the large spoon, but Ranma felt it very difficult to get sleep with her breasts pressed against his back. Perhaps, because of this he woke up the next morning having turned around, Ranma’s hands were full of her rear, as she slowly rocked against him sideways, waking up but slowly, licking her lips. Where that might have gone was never discovered, however, as Jaune roused the two of them. It was time to get up and send up the flare.

While the others waited, hiding around the small base camp they had created, as out of sight as it could possibly be, Ranma set up the launcher, which looked nothing so much as a tiny model of WW2 German 88 flak gun to his eyes. Regardless, he waited until everyone else was in hiding before firing it. If the Grimm were going to react to the noise of the launcher, they didn’t want to start a fight. *Well, not one we couldn’t win quick without the Grimm seeing us, just like over the past few days.*

“Everyone ready?” Ranma asked, looking around and unable to spot any of JNPR.

‘We’re ready, but Jaune and Pyrrha aren’t near enough for me to cover with my Semblance,’ Ren warned.

“That’s fine. We can just think happy thoughts,” Jaune quipped, causing everyone else to laugh, their laughter letting Ranma pick them out of the surrounding rocks. Pyrrha was hiding back where they had slept, her hair under a tight hood, just the tip of Milo visible poking out of the gathered up ghillie suit she had piled in front of the small outcropping. Jaune was similarly using a ghillie suit to look like a bush between two rocks. Ren and Nora were together in another hiding place using one of the few real trees that were around up here given the rocky nature of the terrain.

“Cool. So...” Without further ado, Ranma punched the small button on the side of the weird model gun, and then raced off. By the time it fired he was already at the edge of the

clearing and hopping away higher up the side of the mountain. There, he hid underneath another rock, hiding himself from anything above or to the side. Of course, the fact he had to hold himself there between them, a sheer drop directly below was an issue, but not much of one for Ranma.

The **BOOOM** noise was far larger than even Magnhild firing a full string of grenades all at once, echoing across the mountain and out into the valley below.

Several large flying Grimm immediately moved to investigate, and Pyrrha, watching from her hiding place, was astonished at how quickly, and how many, arrived to do so. *Darn it, where were they hiding? There are at least twenty of them and most seem to be Uber-Vult.*

This was a vulture-like Grimm. It was the Mistrali equivalent of a Giant Nevermore. They had fatter bodies, larger talons, and their stomachs were covered with Grimm armor, making them slower than Nevermore, but also more durable. Instead of a Giant Nevermore's wing attack, Uber-Vults had an attack that... well it was rather like the attack any real bird had, really, poo. It made Pyrrha redden slightly to remember, but the bird droppings of a Vult was acidic, the older the creature, the more acidic it was. Thankfully, Vults didn't work together as well as Nevermore, and they weren't normally migratory or they would be an extremely dangerous threat to Mistral's defense.

All of them kept out of sight, thinking happy or at best neutral thoughts. Meanwhile the Uber-Vults tore the launcher apart, then spent some time seemingly arguing amongst themselves. Jaune and Nora both had trouble keeping quiet as they watched one of the Uber-Vults smacking two others upside the head with its wings, before pecking a third in the stomach. When the first two Uber-Vults tried to retaliate, the more aggressive one ducked under their wings, which smacked into one another. *Oh my god, it's like watching something out of an old Three Goons episode!*

Meanwhile, the small drone was high in the sky, floating there hiding in plain sight thanks to its bird design. As it did, its eyes blinked red and green as it sent off the signal.

Eventually, the vulture-like Grimm took their comedy act elsewhere, and Jaune stood up. "All clear folks."

"Oh blessed Goddess, thank you!" Pyrrha popped out of her hiding place like a gopher out of her hole. "Gah, I need to move!"

"Ooh, me too!" Nora also began to jump around, and Ren rolled his head, looking over at Ranma. "Now we wait, right?"

"Yep."

OOOOOOO

“We’ve got the signal, Hunters!” a communications expert brought in by the council announced, looking around the large town hall that the mission to Spartoi had taken over under the orders of one of the Huntresses.

All around him, there was a moment of silence and then several of the team leaders and others moved towards the communications specialist while others fell back towards their teams. There were twenty teams of hunters here now, the majority of Mistral’s homegrown Hunter teams, with only seven not represented here, being busy with other missions.

Most were full four-man teams. This included team SMRS (Summers). Neo had joined the team at last, and was now hiding under the same black-haired disguise as she had used during the infiltration of Beacon to kill Adam under the soubriquet of Natalie Rainbow. According to her paperwork, she, like the rest of her ‘team’ were newly – and specially – graduated students from Haven.

Although you wouldn’t know it from how Cinder has begun to command the rest of these hunters. Or should I call her Sabrina now? A high school Witch she isn’t, although if you put replace the ‘W’ with a ‘B’ you’d be on the mark, the diminutive ice cream guzzling assassin thought as she sat in a chair in a small area of the common room. To those around her, ‘Natalie’ seems to be playing a game on her scroll that seems to take up all of her attention. In reality though, Neopolitan was people watching, and what she was watching was... Disturbing on one level, and just... unexpected on another.

Even as the two officials from the Council began to try and give orders, the rest of the team leaders all turned to Cinder. Sabrina had become the de facto leader of the entire operation by this point, with only the two officials not realizing it, or perhaps not wanting to acknowledge it. Whether it was the woman’s raw sensuality which completely threw of the men, or her intensity and charisma as well as intelligence, all of the teams gathered for this operation looked to Sabrina as their tactical leader. Even the logistics folk, teams of workers brought in to quickly set up defenses, or repair the walls had begun to see her as the leader of the operation rather than their own foreman.

Far be it from me to not want someone to kick ‘The Man’ in the teeth, I just have to wonder why she’s doing it. Neo had been told that the main goal of this whole operation was to kill off as many Hunter teams as they could, in order to weaken Mistral. Why that was, she didn’t know but that made sense to her. Undermined the group as the head out into Grimm lands, the green does the rest. She had also been told that besides that part of the mission, the main mission in fact was to kill Ranma.

Even now Neo had to bite back the urge to scoff. *Good luck with that!* Cinder herself might be a threat to Ranma, but the number of people Neo thought could fight him on an even footing was very small. It’s somewhat galled her to realize that even she herself wouldn’t put her name on that list.

It was telling, though, that some of the Hunters here were actually pretty famous in Mistral. A group of ex-professors from Haven, who had decided that teaching wasn't for them and gone back into the hunting business. Several famous hunters who had stopped large scale incursions or had been involved in sanctioned cullings for years, and many Hunters who had attempted to make it big in the tournaments, gaining tiny followings from among those who truly understood how important hunting was to the continued welfare of the city-states.

And all of them were now looking at Cinder, waiting for her word to act. "What is the weather like supposed to be tomorrow?" Cinder asked, looking over at one of the other officials.

"Heavy rainfall," the man responded promptly. "Extremely heavy, although no lightning and thunder. Visibility is going to be very low."

"That will make our job easier for a bit, but once we arrive in the city..." The raven-haired woman frowned, then nodded decisively. Turning to the two Bullhead pilots, she ignored the crowd around her as she gave the orders. "The word is go. Link up with team Juniper and the Azure Warden. Tell them we'll need a landing point cleared in the city to bring in supplies, but that we will all be doing a hot drop tomorrow."

Everyone whooped at that, but Cinder simply nodded magnanimously at the crowd waving a few of her fingers. That gesture brought the various team leaders to her, for several hasty conferences, before they too were sent off. A moment later the crowd dispersed eager to get ready or to get some final rest in. Another wave of her fingers brought the rest of team Summers to her as she made for the door.

"Emerald, I'll want you to make certain that our dust weapons are fully stocked tomorrow. Including our little surprises."

Emerald grinned viciously, nodding her head, and feeling a shiver go down her spine as Cinder smiled at her. There was a certain warmth in that smile that Emerald somehow knew was slowly starting to be just for her, and she loved it.

Cinder had found their little surprises, a cache of weapons from the Colors War that no one was doing anything with at the moment. These included handheld bunker busters, flechette rounds for several different grenade launchers, and several dozen mines. If used properly they would make a hash of any encroaching force, Grimm or human.

Hearing this, Neo frowned pensively. *What is your real game here, Cinder? If you wanted the Grimm to wipe out the Hunters, then why bring weapons that will make that so much harder? Are you just trying to look professional and impressive to help your cover, or are you up to something more?* Neo didn't know, although she had tried her best to follow Cinder and her little two hangers-on whenever they went around alone. Cinder had simply given no hint of what her own plans could be.

Seeming to have somehow heard Neo's thoughts, sender turned to her as Emerald hurried off. "I see you were wondering what we are really up to here? Don't bother. Nothing I plan here will have any negative impact on Roman or yourself. If things will continue as they are, or something else will happen, and we will no longer need to interact with one another."

Neo scoffed, crossing her arms and rolling her eyes, the quintessential image of a disbelieving brat for a moment. She didn't even need to hold her scroll up for the message, 'I will believe that when I see it,' to get across.

"Oh, I understand that that comes across as insincere. And as I said, it really is up in the air whether or not things will continue as they are, or if I will be... Moving on to better things," Cinder said with a chuckle. "But if I am telling the truth, what do you have to lose?"

Scowling, Neopolitan understood that Cinder had a point.

Once inside her bedroom, Cinder began to meditate, reaching her mind into the Grimm parasite at the base of her spine, sending out a signal that she wished to communicate.

Soon, she felt her Mistress's mind reaching out for her own, twitching as that powerful mind invaded her own. Never again would Cinder, at the depths of her mind, ever see this as anything but an invasion. Gone were the days where she had thought that this mode of communication meant she was favored above all. Instead, it simply meant she was first among pawns.

"Well, my dear queen? How goes your part of the plan?" Salem inquired, seemingly mellow for once.

"We are launching the operation to reclaim Sparta tomorrow, mistress. We will be leaving mid-afternoon tomorrow. I regret to inform you that it will be a heavy rain, so if you wish for your local Grimm to be on guard, they might not see us. But the Azure Warden signaled that he will be in position for their initial supply drop. After that, he and the Hunters he is with will be in charge of heading into the city first, disrupting the Grimm there as best they can."

"The Grimm inside the city are going to be sacrificed of course, as you well understand. I have already begun to gather the Grimm of several valleys nearby. They will start moving now, and will be in position to assail the walls almost as soon as you and the rest of the sacrifices are done clearing the interior," Salem answered, her mental tone enthusiastic.

Cinder nodded, sending feelings of judicious approval. *"Not that you need my approval mistress of course, but that means that taking while we have already our efforts in a fight. Excellent. Will you wish us to knock holes in the outer wall of Spartoi if it still stands."*

“...No. Do not bother. More than a quarter of the Grimm I have gathered are flying or climbing types. And even if thousands of Grimm die there will always be more. There is no strength in mankind equal to mine!”

Cinder had gotten very good at hiding her thoughts from Salem during moments like this. If she hadn't, the growing contempt she felt for the Grimm Queen would've shown through at that moment. *Strength perhaps, but intelligence is another story.*

“Remember, that you and the others must be wearing your marks, or you too will be targeted,” Salem warned. She attempted to sound the caring kind, and for a moment, it almost worked. Cinder found herself fighting to see that feeling the falsehood it really was.

“And what about Tyrian and Hazel?”

“They have not yet contacted me but I know that they too should be in position to attack the Azure warden when they can.”

“Just so long as their own plans going forward Mistress, their use of these bandits and Tyrian's desire to assassinate the Azure warden himself doesn't get in the way of everything else. I don't rate his chances very highly on his own, nor these bandits despite the amount of respect they seem to garner in the underworld. It will be your Grimm who will be the true danger to the Azure warden, and it wouldn't be the first time that criminals and hunters have banded together to fight Grimm,” Cinder warned.

“You have a point. Unfortunately, from what I said, there is very little that Hazel and Tyrian can do, now that they have passed on this job to the Branwen clan,” Salem responded, her mental tone alive with the delight of using a former pawn of Ozpin against his newest tool. *“Still, I will inform them both to wait on their attack until my Grimm are fully invested into the assault.”*

After that, Salem pulled out of the mind meld. Cinder lay there, recovering a bit, waving off a now returned Emerald's concern when she poked her head in the doorway. She stood up, stretching, and even felt good enough to add a bounce in place, that caused Emerald to blush and stutter most endearingly. A wager, a single roll of the dice, Cinder mused, looking down at her hands, as fire appeared over her finger lightly. Will I start down the road of becoming a Queen of my own making? Or will I simply solidify my place as the most valuable piece in Salem's hands.

She followed Emerald out, and was amused to note that she and Neo had set aside their differences in order to prepare a decent looking salad and sandwich dinner for everyone. She was about to praise them for that, getting along not the dinner, but at that point, Mercury came in, scowling angrily.

“What’s wrong?” Emerald asked instantly, her eyes narrowed as she looked at the young man.

“We have a problem,” Mercury began her preamble. “You know that latest group of people who came in this morning? We were wondering who they were but it turns out they are newsies.”

“What?” Cinder growled, her good humor from a moment ago evaporating.

“Yep, reporters. Three of them, each of them with an accompanying cameraman.”

“I thought the Council agreed not to bring along such dead weight until after Spartoi was in our hands,” Cinder scowled angrily.

“Apparently, they got a written note from the Council that they’re to record everything they can. And you’ll never believe it, but at least two of them are already chattering about wanting to get an exclusive interview with the Invincible Girl,” Mercury drawled.

“Considering her reaction to everything else we’ve seen since we arrived in Mistral, I figure that isn’t going to go the way they want it to,” Emerald snickered.

Neo held up her scroll. “I don’t like that. I don’t like being recorded the best of times, and if there are three cameramen around, were going to have to be very careful when we use our semblance and when we start to betray the other hunters.”

“If we betray them,” Cinder corrected, frowning as she looked down at the food on the table thinking furiously. The rest of what Neapolitan said was quite correct however. *I truly do not think that the mistral counsel thought this through. The last thing they should want is for the sheep to know how dangerous the world beyond the paddock is. Still, I can use this.* “... Do the other team leaders know about this yet?”

Mercury shook his head. “I talked to the group’s Bullhead pilot, the rest of them have sequestered themselves for now. After all, the story hasn’t even started yet,” he ended with a snort.

“In that case, I think we can use this...” Cinder said, affirming her earlier thoughts. “Mercury, Emerald, get in contact with the other teams. I will be doing the same. We will warn them about this new complication and start planning out a plan to deal with it as well as making certain everyone knows who to blame, which will be just as important.”

The Council will realize that loyalty to the government only stretches so far when that government is led by people, whose actual identity is a secret. Which can be useful in all sorts of ways. As can the footage itself, although it can also be dangerous. Still, that line is one I am well used to walking at this point.

OOOOOOO

The bullhead flew by during the night, using a black parachute to drop a crate of supplies down to the fivesome on the ground. Ren and Ranma ran out to get them, coming back quickly. One item was a single package of orders giving them the green light to head into the city to start to clear out Spartoi during the rain. That made good sense to Ranma's as did the idea of clearing an area within the city for more supplies in the future. "Let's get going you four. I want us gone from here asap," Ranma ordered, stuffing the rest of the supplies – including a loaf of fresh bread as a treat – into his ki space.

None of the others, not even Nora, bothered to argue, having seen several Vults circling the area, disturbed by the fast bullhead's flyby.

OOOOOOO

Several watchers stared up at where the black painted bullhead had just flown by. And while they were not Grimm, that did not mean that they were friendly. "What the hell?" muttered one bandit, staring up at the sky. "I've never seen a bullhead like that before."

"It is a special operations bullhead, made to drop off supplies or people quickly and then get out. Did we see where it turned around?" The speaker was a young looking short haired girl, dressed in much the same outfit as the previous speaker, gray jacket, long black pants. At her side she wore two weapons, which looked like someone had broken two circular saw blades and stuck the parts on either side of the pistol with the cutting-edge facing outward.

"Yeah, to our east, maybe a few miles away?" a third bandit said, staring from his own little hiding place nearby. The fact that they were so close would have astonished Jaune or any of the others, even Ranma. But while Ranma had spent a few years out here, the bandits, Clan Branwen were left out here for generations. They could literally hide on a barren hill better than Ranma could in a jungle if they had enough time.

"Good! Let's get going."

"Vernal, I thought the chief said that we should wait for her to get back?" another bandit asked, although he, like his fellows, were also moving as he spoke.

"She did, but come on! This is just one team of hunters, all alone out there with this Azure warden guy. There's no way he's as tough as they say, and I'm just trying to show the so-called invincible girl that her title matters Dick out here in the real world!"

That one received a chorus of laughter, and more than one of the clan members brought his fist up to his chest, muttering the first rule of the clan. "There is only strength that is worth respect."

Within moments, the group of ten clan members that had been left behind when their chieftain turned back to their normal base camp were moving, silent and certain through the night. The only ones left were two people who had been unlucky enough to lose a game of dice with the others, in order to tell their chieftain and the rest of the clan where they had gone.

OOOOOO

Once more having taken the position of Tail-end Charlie, Ranma frowned as he looked around the group as they made their way back down the mountains to the closest point between the hills and the distant city of Spartoi. He estimated that it would take at least a few hours running for any of them to get to the outer wall of the city, which they had seen through their spyglasses from on high was still intact most part. Ranma wasn't looking forward to that, running out in the open out in that grassy plain would make him far too vulnerable.

But that wasn't what he was frowning about. Now, Ranma was getting a strange feeling, a feeling like they were being watched or maybe stalked. It was sort of like the feeling he'd get when Shampoo was close on his trail back in China or when a new rival was due to show up.

He hissed out a warning. "Jaune keep on going, and close in with Nora and Pyrrha. When you do, call Ren back."

"What, what's going on?" Jaune called back hesitantly.

"We're being followed. There is a boulder up ahead, I'm going to break off there and see if I can ambush them. If you hear the sounds of fighting, the rest of you can come back."

Jaune frowned but shrugged, and did as ordered. Moments later, Ranma reached the boulder he'd been talking about, and following Jaune around it, ducked down instead, pulling out his ghillie suit covering himself as he crouched down, hiding partly because of the suit, and partially because of a small indent in the ground beside the boulder.

It worked, as a minute later, three people passed by, moving slowly and silently through the darkness. A slight sound from above Ranma caused him to freeze, as two more people joined the others. Looking around, he saw several more moving through the limited foliage around here as silently as he and team Juniper had been for the past few days. *Now, they are better at this! The only difference is, they don't have ghillie suits to help them move unseen. Although they seem to each have a backpack on, maybe they have something similar?*

Regardless, it was clear that this group was targeting them, and that was enough for Ranma. As soon as she felt that the last of them had passed by, watching the sky for Grimm, he moved out of his hiding place, heading up behind the man. The bandit, thief, or whatever the guy was had incredible survival instincts, already turning around before Ranma reached him. But before he could open his mouth, Ranma had jabbed a palm up into his jaw, causing his teeth the clack together. That same hand grabbed him around the face, and pulled them in,

suffocating him in a chokehold even as the man tried to escape in various ways, including a decent attempt at a foot stomp. Most people being choked out wouldn't think of that.

However, dealing with that one had caused the others to turn in Ranma's direction, several of them moving out of the faint scrub for around charging forward silently with bladed weapons. Again, Ranma took this to as a sign that these people were very used to moving around in the Grimm lands.

Whirling, Ranma allowed the feet of the man he was choking to fly up into the air as he moved, smashing one individual in the face with his friend's feet, it's him sprawling. It didn't seem to hurt the man much and Ranma nodded slightly. *They also all have their aura unlocked. Honestly, that makes them much more sensible than the majority of people I've met in the kingdoms. Doesn't mean I'm going to go easy on them.*

Two more fell to the flailing legs of them for companion, and then a woman charged Ranma's back, ducking under a blow meant for her. In her hands she carried a long Trident, which unfolded as she thrust it forward's. Ranma hopped up, landing on top of the outstretched spear, and kicked her hard in the face, even as he discarded his now unconscious weapon of mass humiliation, tossing it down onto the woman, who had already recovered from his connection, only to blink in astonishment as her friend's body smashed into her head, sending both of them tumbling to the ground.

Two more took slashes at Ranma, but by that point, team Juniper arrived. Jaune was the first there, his sword slashing through the blades of another woman, who was using two short swords, the black and metal of the woman's blades no match for the Arc sword. Nora arrived from above with a silent grin on her face, her War Hammer crashing into the back of a large somewhat obese looking man, sending him to the ground with a loud thud. This was followed by several more funds as she made certain he stayed out of it, Magnhild crashing into his head over and over again.

Pyrrha appeared out of the darkness like a wraith, getting in between two bandits before they knew she was there. Her shield crashed into the side of the head of one of them, sending him stumbling, before she took his feet out from under him with a low kick, flipping up words at the same time to dodge this strike of the other bandit. She landed feetfirst on to the downed man's head, smashing him into the ground and out, feeling the first of aura as his broke.

The woman on the other hand was somewhat more skilled, coming in at her low to the ground, slashing at her with a very strange -looking weapons in either hand. Penelope deflected them, being careful not to let the impacts caused too loud a clamor.

Two more bandits fell to Ren, and suddenly, the one woman Pyrrha was fighting was the only one still conscious. She backed away from Pyrrha and moved her fingers, turning the safety on her guns off as she twirled in place about to fire them.

However, Pyrrha wasn't about to let that happen. Reaching out with her polarity powers, the weapons were covered with a black energy in the woman's hands before Penelope twitched her hand this way, pulling the guns out of the woman's grip despite how strong a grip that was. She then clenched fist, and both weapons made a loud crunching noise as they were shattered into pieces. "I'm sorry, but we really don't want you to bring down the Grimm on us."

Staring around her, the woman still raised her fists, grimacing angrily. "Dammit! You just wait, the Clan Branwen will avenge us!"

"The clan? I don't suppose you'd be willing to tell us why you expect to talk to us? Or to be enter your territory or something?" Ranma asked, while Pyrrha and Ren both turned their attention upwards, watching out for more Grimm along with Jaune as Nora cheerfully moved over to the woman.

Even though the woman turned fast as lightning towards her, and jabbed that a punch, Nora caught it, and pulled the girl in, getting her arm behind her as Nora's other arm when around her shoulders. As the rest of her team would've told you, once Nora had her hands on you, it was all over unless you could completely overpower her like Ranma could.

The girl however seems to take this in stride, stopping her attempt break out quickly as she stared at Ranma. "You would be the Azure warden then? It's you we want. Clan Branwen has taken on the job of killing you! And while you might be strong, you are no match for our chieftain!"

While the nearby Pyrrha gritted her teeth, and Nora tightened her grip around the woman, causing her to gasp, Ranma's eyes had gone wide at the last name. "Branwen? Your leader wouldn't be named Raven, would she?"

The other woman's eyes widened in shock, and Ranma grinned a mix of real humor and dangerousness. "Well then, that could be interesting. Although whether or not you'll be conscious for it, will depend on how quickly they find you and the rest of your merry band of incompetents."

The woman's eyes widened, and she bared her teeth, as if she was about to bite Nora's arm where it was across her upper chest. But before she could, Ranma punched her in the jaw, having calculated it just enough so that her aura broke. Her eyes widened as she stared at him, and a quick chop to the neck knocked her unconscious.

"I'm glad we were able to turn the tables on them, if we hadn't, this lot I am little more dangerous than we could deal without using our weapons for real," Ren murmured from nearby. As it is, we knocked them out so quickly that I was only forced hours at the end."

“Ranma? You seemed to recognize their clan’s name. I have heard rumors of Clan Branwen before this, bandits, robbers, thieves and murderers the lot of them. But where did you hear the name?” Pyrrha asked.

“The old lady who I lived out in the wilds with before coming to Vail knew her. She said the Raven was transportation at one point, and that they agreed in principle on a few matters, but had different philosophies.” *Now I am wondering how old Spring knew Raven, what the connection was, and if it could possibly mean that Raven is another maiden? If so, that could be a fun fight, although I hope Yang will forgive me if I need to break her mother’s legs before dragging her back to Yang.*

Shaking his head at that, Ranma explained that he didn’t really know anything more about Raven, although he would recognize her from the picture that Spring had shown him. “For now, break all of their weapons, gather them up in a single place, and leave them. If we want to get any rest before our sprint to Sparto, we need to get closer than this.”

Operations quickly accomplished by the simple expedient of Pyrrha using her powers on each weapon in turn, mangling them beyond any hope of use. Then the five of them were off once more, concerned about the death threat on Ranma, but assuming once the operation to retake Sparto can Clan Branwen would be smart enough to steer clear.

OOOOOO

Raven Branwen appeared out of one for portals, as behind her, the rest of her clan tromped through, twenty fighters, all of them fourteen or above, blooded and with Aura unlocked. Behind her mask, Raven’s eyes narrowed, and she gestured with a finger towards one of the two people who had been left behind at the meeting place. “What happened?”

About an hour later, Raven and a few of the others came upon Vernal and her band. Raven breathed a small sigh of relief at seeing Vernal. The two of them shared a secret, and it would have been beyond annoying to train someone else to act as Vernal did for Raven. The girl was already conscious, moving around the rest of her band, as Raven came out of the darkness behind them.

Vernal twisted around, reaching down to grab a shattered sword in her hand, before breathing size relief. “Raven!”

“What happened?” Raven questioned harshly.

As more of the clan came out of the brush around them and began to see to their fellows, vernal explained, gulping a little under the glare of Raven’s Grimm mask.

When she finished speaking, Raven turned to stare out over the grassy plain towards the center of the valley. "And you are certain that he said that they would be heading towards the city of Spartoi?"

"Yes chief!"

"Good. In that case, we will wait here for now. Tristan?"

One of the people arrived with Raven came forward, bowing his head, long like ears twitching this way and that on the sides of his head, showing he was a bat Faunus. "Yes chief?"

"You and Celic and Fancy Harry trail after them. Do not engage, simply keep an eye on them. With the weather tomorrow they shouldn't be able to spot you in turn. I want to know the moment they start fighting in the city. Once they do, will move in, wait for them to exhaust themselves before striking." *I'm glad I have been to Spartoi before this, which means I can teleport the whole clan into the city...*

End Episode 7, Chapter 22

And from here, we head into ACTION!!