

King of Champions

Prologue: Through the Looking Glass, Brightly

“Oh Merlin, look who it is!”

“Oh my, it is, the Man-Who-Conquered! Do you think we can get his autograph?”

“Better not, you know what they say in the Daily Bugle. Potter isn’t into that kind of thing.”

“Besides, you know about the other side of the rumors about him,” A fourth voice hissed. “It’s dangerous to stay near him for too long.”

Even though he heard the murmurs around him all too clearly, a slightly drunk Harry Potter made no move to react to the murmurs of the crowd, and in particular the group of four women. That way lay even more annoyance and stupidity. Instead, Harry left his money on the pub's counter and then made his way into Diagon Alley. He didn’t need to look behind him at the door to the leaky cauldron to know that a lot of the crowd there was now gazing after him. *I wonder, has there ever been someone who garnered so much attention while just eating alone in a corner? I feel as if it’s time to break out the glare again.*

Despite his somewhat whimsical, if equally drunken, thoughts, Harry Potter was quite depressed as he walked down the street of Diagon Alley, looking around, trying to remember better times. He also tried to ignore the ever-increasing whispers, the pointing, the staring, the glares from the Purebloods and the adoring looks from the Muggle-born evening out, with the giggles from the girls just creeping him out.

The only time Harry reacted was as he passed Gringotts, and a middle-aged wizard came out, pausing to stare at him with cold, hating eyes. Harry stopped then, looking back at the man, no expression on his face, his own emerald eyes simply locking on to the man’s light brown ones, waiting.

After a few seconds, the man looked away hurriedly, and Harry did the same, moving down the street alone.

Not that this was wholly unusual. Harry was always alone these days. Oh, Harry could certainly have found some ‘companionship’ of any sort he cared to easily enough. But they wouldn’t be friends. They wouldn’t be comrades who understood Harry, where he’d come from, his life before becoming famous. Even his classmate from Hogwarts, even those that had been there at the final battle, were quick to keep their distance.

That aversion started long before the final battle, and Harry knew it. At first, it had simply been the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. Most of them had been unwilling to paint targets on their backs by being too close to someone who Riddle, Old Moldyshorts himself, had decided to kill.

Harry could have handled that. Those people didn't know him at all, after all. He couldn't trust them at his back, and Harry knew it took a special sort of person to stand up to the threat of death anyway.

But then Ron and Hermione had left him. Indeed, they had left Harry and the UK entirely to make a new life together with Hermione's parents in Australia.

That had been the start of things. The fact that it happened during the hunt for Voldemort's Horcruxes was simply icing on the cake. They had made no effort to come back once the war was over, either because they felt guilty about leaving him in the lurch or because they couldn't deal with Molly. Hermione had tried to send him some messages once the war was over, but Harry had never bothered to reply.

He missed them dearly, but their leaving him like that had shown what they felt his friendship was worth, and he wasn't going to make that mistake a third time. Well, second for Hermione, admittedly. But even so, these days, Harry was wondering if fair-weather friends like them would be better than being alone.

Of his other friends and acquaintances, Tonks and Remus were both dead. And while Andromeda was kind to him on the occasions they met, she had made it clear that he wasn't welcome in her house and didn't want Harry anywhere near young Teddy. Whether or not she thought that would bring actual danger, or if Andromeda felt his presence would stop Teddy from having a normal life, Harry didn't know, but in either case, he understood her reasoning all too well.

As for the rest of the Weasleys, it had been Ginny who had helped him on the Horcrux hunt. At the time that had been fine, and the two of them had even gotten kind of close. But in the final battle, the Weasleys had lost several members of their family, one of them being Ginny. Harry had been distraught at the time, but the close-knit family had been utterly decimated by the loss of Ginny, Bill, and George, made worse by the fact Ron had refused to come back from Australia.

Of his other friends, Luna Lovegood and Neville Longbottom had survived, but Luna had been... horribly abused when she had been captured by the Snatchers. Ever since, the lively, fanciful Ravenclaw had completely retreated into her own fanciful world. Neville and Hannah Abbott, a Hufflepuff, were looking after Luna, which was a relief.

Yet neither wished to have Harry in their lives, and Neville had made that point very clear the last time they'd seen one another in public randomly. Neville had simply turned away, quickly walking away from Harry.

He wasn't alone in that. Nearly all of his other acquaintances who had reluctantly fought in the final battle had distanced themselves from Harry. Not a one who had seen his final battle against Riddle had even tried to contact him.

This should have left Harry open to people who wanted to get close to Harry to use him. But Harry couldn't care less about fame or money and was very leery of those who did care about such things. What Harry treasured most of all was family and friends. Things he had first been introduced to with the Weasleys over his second summer in the Wizarding World.

Beyond that, fame was only useful for what you could do with it, something that Harry knew had taken him far too long to realize. But now? What was the point of finding a cause? What was the point of fighting the good fight when there was no one around that you wanted to share the good fight with?

Shaking his head drunkenly, let his mind move on, grumbling, *to say nothing about those like that bloke by the bank or others like him who think that they can make themselves the next dark Lord if they can get the drop on me. Or those pureblood swots who see me as the symbol for the Muggle-born Equality Movement.*

Harry would cheerfully hold his hand up to being that symbol, but he could do without the glares and the ever-constant danger that went with it or the fact that the muggle-borns were also starting to develop their own extremists. Looking to the side, Harry glanced at the bookstore window, seeing a copy of the *Daily Prophet* there, a headline reading: Muggle-born supremacy movement on the rise, do you want them to take your job too?

Ah, I see Rita and her ilk are still hard at work, flinging dirt on everyone who can't pay them to be quiet. It's almost enough to make one wonder which side really won the war? Harry pondered rhetorically, shaking his head.

That and many other things made Harry think that, only a year after the last one ended, he would have to fight another war. But given some of the things the Muggle-born extremists were saying about taking their rights by force, overthrowing the establishment, and above all showing the pureblood's who was really superior, Harry didn't think he wanted to fight for them either.

At first, Harry had tried to use his fame to stop that kind of thinking, but it hadn't worked, both sides just twisting his words to their own ends, including the Ministry. After a few months of trying, Harry had given up in disgust. The argument was getting all too gray and political for him. *Not like during the war against Riddle. There it was us against them, fight or die.*

What would the point be, anyway? Harry hiccupped, then mumbled an excuse me before walking on. *Who would I be fighting for now? I've never fought for causes, no matter how much I believed in equal rights and such. I've never fought for fame or fortune or the law! I only fought to protect me and mine. Now, it's just me, and it doesn't really feel worth it.*

A few stumbling steps later, Harry paused in the plaza in front of the ministry building, staring at the grotesque fountain there; the thing lit by magical lights even as the night finished falling. Because of that, Harry could still see the wizard with his wand held high, while at his

feet a house-elf looking up at the wizard adoringly. To one side and below them, goblins stood, glaring down at the ground, while other magical creatures looked on in adoration, their faces deliberately carved to look as stupid and oafish as they could. Normally, looking at that thing would just make Harry annoyed and angry at the ego inherent in it and the fact even Muggleborn agreed in the primacy of wizard-kind.

But now, deep into his depression and self-pity, looking at it just made Harry more depressed. *Even Dobby is gone, poor blighter.* The ever-loyal, if lacking in common sense, house-elf had died during the war.

Looking up at the ministry building, Harry's thoughts meandered, from going in there and grabbing the nearest Muggle-born and Pureblood and making them talk to one another like civil human beings, to just burning it all down and saying, "Screw you all! Start over. Maybe this time, you'll get it right!"

But those thoughts didn't really stay in Harry's mind for too long. Instead, he went back to the same problem he'd been getting depressed about for a while now. *Is that when it truly started? Is that when I truly began to be alone, when I made the mistake of leading my friends into that ambush? When I saw Sirius die?*

That had happened during his fifth year, when Harry, following dreams which he later learned had been implanted in his head by his connection to Riddle, had gone to the Ministry to try and save Sirius. There Harry and his allies had found an ambush waiting for them. The fact that they, as children, had been able to fight their way out should have been a matter of pride for Harry. But looking back on it, it was clear the Death Eaters had been trying to capture them rather than kill them, which meant the victory was worthless.

And even if that wasn't the case, Sirius's death changed the entire night into a disaster. The only man who had stepped forward to try and be a real father figure to him. The only one whose affection and support was utterly unconditional.

With that thought, Harry acted on a sudden whim. He headed towards the Ministry building, his face shifting into what he had heard called his AK-Glare. The glare and his name did the trick. He was led into the Department of Mysteries and then left alone to stare at the Veil of Death. Harry knew that the guards on duty would share his doing so with the Prophet and whatever within ten, maybe five minutes of the door closing behind him. But Harry didn't care if an entirely new rumor started up. *There are already so many. One more isn't going to make any difference at all.*

Putting that thought out of his mind, Harry moved forward, staring at the Veil of Death from all sides, even the back, which was too close to the wall behind it for anyone to squeeze between the two, his thoughts still on Sirius and becoming fatalistic. *If what Dumbledore's spirit said about how Death is merely the next great adventure is true, I wonder, if I stepped through this, will I be able to start over somewhere else? Will I be able to finally find family, something*

worth living for, instead of just going through the motions? Or is Sirius out there somewhere? Somewhere I could join him?

“My word, those are some depressing thoughts you’re thinking, oh great Boy-Who-Conquered. But before you go all suicidal on me, perhaps, we can finally speak, last of the Peverells and owner of my Hallows.”

The voice was wry, without any hint of anger, and seemed to come from everywhere around Harry. But the tone didn’t register with Harry, only the fact there was no one visible anywhere around him, and suddenly Harry’s hands were filled with wands, one of them his old Phoenix feather wand, the other, the Death Stick. A wordless gesture had created a shield of steel to one side of him, while from his other wand, sparks began to appear in the air. This was a spell he had learned from a book in Dumbledore’s library, which basically sent out small heat-seeking bolts of fire, like pellets from a shotgun.

His defense secure, Harry readied a Homenum Revelio as he glared around the room. “Who are you? Where are you hiding? Come out, and maybe I won’t do more than thump you on the ear for this stunt,” he barked, while to one side, fiery death continued to multiply.

“Ah yes, you humans do prefer to actually have a face to look at as you converse. I had forgotten.”

At first, nothing happened, and Harry was about to open his mouth to shout another demand for the speaker to reveal himself, when movement out of the corner of his eye shifted Harry’s attention back towards the Veil of Death. For a moment, he thought that someone might have somehow been hiding on the other side of it despite having seen there was no room there for a grown man to do so.

But instead, the movement was coming from the very Veil itself. It was rippling as if in an unseen wind. Or rather like water rippling from something just beneath the surface as something pushed up and out into the air.

The being that appeared was in the shape of a man, a man made of shadow ash and a single dark cloak, the only solid thing about it. It hovered in the area instead of standing. Its arms were folded into its robes, unseeing eyes gazing at Harry, barely discernable red lights under the cloak’s hood.

Harry had been in the presence of Dementors more times than he cared to contemplate, even hundreds at a time. Within seconds of this thing appearing, Harry knew its presence was more powerful by far. But instead of feeling fear and his happiness leaving him, all he felt was the certainty that this creature could kill him in an instant. It could do so with a blink, with a snap of its fingers. Harry was less than nothing to it, and he should realize that and be very respectful.

Harry had never been one to be cowed, not since his second year against the basilisk. Growling, Harry shrugged off the last of his inebriation and took a single step back, pressing into the metal plate he had conjured up, both wands ready and waiting.

He didn't really need them. Up to his confrontation with Riddle, Harry had been practicing wandless magic, which had served him well. But the Death Stick added a greater punch to some of his spells, while his Phoenix wand allowed for greater control. And at the moment, their feel in his hands was acting almost like a security blanket.

Or it was until the Death Stick in his offhand began to vibrate. The pouch at his side, which he kept his invisibility cloak in, just in case, even now, also began to quiver and shake.

Nor did the being's lack of concern do anything for Harry's current defensiveness. "I don't suppose you have the ring with you, do you? With you being the last of their lines, I feel perfectly within my rights to confiscate all three Hallows."

Harry's eyes narrowed, but he slowly lowered his wands. He knew they wouldn't help him against this thing anyway. "Let's say that I believe you, and there really is an anthropomorphic personification of Death. Why..." He paused, staring over the creature's shoulder, then down at the Death Stick. "You said something about being the last of the Peverell's, didn't you. Is that why you're able to drop in like this?"

Death's voice continued to sound almost friendly, perhaps even pleasant as he replied. "Ah, now there is the wit I have come to enjoy while watching your adventures, Peverell."

"Potter," Harry corrected.

"Peverell, for the purpose of this discussion. Potter was always the lesser branch of the family, and it is because you have Peverell blood in your veins that I can speak to you, yes. And it is that blood, and your deeds, that have combined to let me offer you a choice."

"A choice?" Harry's teeth clenched, and he slowly raised his hands, even though the spirit in front of him began to glare at him, willing him to set his wands aside. "When you say that, it sounds more as if you want me to do something for you. I'm actually getting some used Rovers salesman vibes here."

"I see your mind is entirely back to normal. Good, I suppose. And yes, I do want something from you. But I am more than willing to pay, and in so doing, give you the thing you want most. A new life."

"That is a very odd thing to hear from the personification of entropy," Harry drawled. But after a few seconds spent staring at the apparition, Harry put his wands away, sliding them one after the other into their holsters along his wrists. "Still, I'll listen to your pitch."

The being in front of Harry laughed. "Peverel, do you have any idea how odd it is to find myself talking to a being who is not intimidated by me? Your lineage has always been unique in

that area, but only your direct ancestor, the youngest brother, ever had the balls to actually try to joke around with me. It's refreshing. Every personification of, as you put it, entropy should have their own little Peverell around, less they get big heads."

"And now you're buttering me up! That does nothing to my former thoughts about you wanting to sell me something," Harry quipped back, and again the being laughed.

"Very well, to business. You are not only unique for your blood and your ability to withstand being in my presence. You are a tool of fate, what that persnickety bitch insists on calling 'a crossroads locale'. But you are one who has already defeated the challenges set before you. That means you are a free agent, so to speak. And as I mentioned, it is only because of your ancestor's deals with me that I was the first force of the universe to come and speak to you."

"Does that mean more of you are going to pop up? I'm not certain I like that." Harry's lips twitched. "As crappy as my life is right now, I don't need that kind of trouble."

"Ah, but it does sound interesting to you, doesn't it? I felt your heart race just then. I saw your eyes narrowed, a gleam coming to them. You like a challenge, Peverell, even if you don't actually live for them."

Harry said nothing but indicated with a wave of his hand that Death was right but that he should also get on with things.

"As I was saying, you are a free agent. That means that we can do with you what we will and that you can impact the world around you in unique and unusual ways. And so I have an offer for you." Death took a step sideways, gesturing towards the Veil behind him. "You can go through with what you were thinking of doing, enter this, a physical entrance to my realm. If you do, your life in this world will end, and your soul will be returned to the Wheel of Resurrection. You will forget this life entirely, but I will promise you that I will send your soul where it will find happiness."

Harry stared at the Veil, then over at Death. "If that was all, there would be no need for you to appear in front of me like this. That's obvious choice one, the basic model. Let's go up a bit in price."

Death snickered at that, a wholly unusual sound which put Harry in mind of clawed feet touching down on stone for some reason. "True. Or, you can take on a task for me and those like me. Call us... powers of the life cycle." Death seemed to shake his head, and when he spoke, his voice was even deeper, almost cold now where it had been previously warm. "There is a world out there, a world whose cycle is horribly disjointed. The forces of chaos and entropy have come together and stalk the world in various physical forms. The gods of that world have abandoned it, and Humanity is its usual self. Unless something drastic is added into the mixture, that world will be destroyed, setting off a ripple effect that will affect others both in that universe and in others. This **must** be set right."

Harry frowned as images appeared in the air around Death as he spoke, images of black-skinned, oily-looking creatures of various types. They also shared bony masks or highlights here and there and red eyes.

"I understand what you mean when you say humans are their usual selves there. But usually, that also means that someone is already acting as a force for good in that world. Why do you need me?"

"Two reasons. One, yes, there was a force for good there. But that force has become jaded, disjointed from Humanity and his true task. It is time for the ancient king to step down and be replaced by new blood. And, second, new magic added to the world will have an impact entirely beyond simply backing someone currently within that realm."

Well, damn me, that answers both my questions, doesn't it? "All right, that's the top model you want to sell me. Now, what are you willing to pay me to take it off your hands?"

"That analogy seems to have reached its limits," Death mused, while Harry just nodded his head, indicating he had known that before he had even started to speak. "In any event, yes, I do have a certain payment. If you agree to take on this task for us, you will be reborn there with your memories intact and much of your magic. And further," Death went on almost softly, as he stared at Harry. "Further, you will become part of a loving family."

Death seemed to snort, his form becoming even more gaseous for a moment before reforming. "Indeed, Potter, considering the household I'm thinking of, you will have all the family you can stomach and then some. In a good way, mind." Then Death shrugged. "And of course, there's always the third choice. You can leave my used car lot to continue to beat your analogy into the dirt like a dead horse and go about in the car you already have here in this world. If you do, I will block other extra-dimensional entities from bothering you further."

Harry might well have made fun of that if only to keep the running gag going, but his mind had frozen at the description of the family Death would ensure he would be born into. Being born into something like the Weasley family? That... for Harry, that would be brilliant. His happiest memories were of when he was over at the Weasley house, surrounded by the Weasley brothers and Ginny and Hermione, or the few times they'd all been happy the summer Sirius had lived in his family's house.

"In the first choice, do you have any idea where I would go?" Harry asked, although honestly, he had already made his decision. *There is always a choice between doing what is right and easy. Easy would be starting over, my happiness assured and this shite of a life forgotten. Doing what is right would be to both have a cause worth fighting for and the memories of this life to do it with. And that won't be so much of a burden if I have people to share my new life with. A loving family... that is an enticing lure to be sure.*

Death shook his head. "No. If you do not take my offer to go to Remnant... that is the name of the world, by the way. You will discover why, if you do go there. But if you do not take

my offer to go there now, you will simply be one more soul upon the wheel, to be sent wherever random chance provides. Harry Potter will disappear, to be replaced by someone new, although I can at least guarantee your life will be both easy and happy. If you take my deal, there will still be more than enough of you left to be Harry, even though this body of yours will be destroyed, as will your wands and everything else you have on you."

"In that case, there's no real choice at all, is there? Continue with my freaking depressing, lonely life here, start elsewhere, or take up a new cause, find a new family and possibly find happiness. You really know how to make your choice stand out from the crowd, don't you?"

"Just because I am obligated to give you choices does not mean I am obligated to make them all seem equal in your eyes," Death retorted, and the two of them exchanged a laugh at that. "I take it you have made your decision?"

"What about a focus for my magic? Will I need one in this new world? And will you take possession of the Hallows when I am gone? I would rather like to take the cloak with me."

"I will, yes. There will be no need for another so-called Master of Death here, and no one of Peverell blood exists beyond yourself anyway. And there is no way to send something physical between realms so far removed from one another, so you will not be able to keep your invisibility cloak, I am afraid. Although you and I will still have a certain... connection, Peverell. That may help you in your new world, or it might not. You will have to see."

Death seemed somehow to smirk at that before going on. "As for a focus, no. You will be able to control your magic without any exterior aid, although you might find that certain spells work better when aimed through a weapon. As in this world, the use of a focus is not truly necessary."

That matched what Harry had found here, and with his questions answered (or at least as much as he felt Death was willing to do) Harry moved towards the Veil, standing beside Death right in front of it. "I have. I'll go to Remnant. I'll fight your fight there, so long as you come through with your end of the bargain. My memories and abilities to be kept, and a family to be made."

"Done."

The single word came out with far more emphasis than Death had used previously, rattling Harry's bones and making the ground and ceiling shake so much that it almost seemed as if the ceiling was going to come down.

Then Death laid one hand on Harry's shoulder, a very odd sensation. It was there, but Harry's body told him there was no sensation accompanying that touch, while his mind and even his heart told him there was as if the pressure was only being felt on a mystical level rather than physical. At the same time, he felt the Elder Wand disintegrate within its holster.

Somehow, he knew the same had occurred in the mokeskin pouch where he kept the Invisibility Cloak. Perhaps even in the secret hidden urn that contained the poorly named Resurrection Stone.

A second later the destruction was complete, and Death smiled. “Enjoy your new life Harry Potter, and don’t worry, most of your mind will fade away during your baby years. You won’t want to kill yourself with embarrassment more than twice the amount a normal human does while they are young.”

“Wait, what?” Harry squawked, and then something was pushed out of Harry. Or rather, Harry felt himself being pushed out of the physical shell of his body. The separation there was very difficult to put into words but for a moment, Harry could somehow look over his now-ethereal shoulder and stare at the body he had previously resided in as it slumped to the ground, falling forward. Then there was a rushing sensation as he turned back to see the Veil in front of him. The veil burst into a kaleidoscope of colors, reaching out for him and Harry Potter of Earth was no more.

The next few seconds were quite fraught, and for a time, Harry’s mind was there was too disjointed, unable to concentrate on anything, unable to take in any sensations, for which, later on, he was profoundly thankful. One should never know what the sensation of being torn from one life and universe to another and having your body de-aged in the process could feel like.

Then there was pain, heat, searing agony, and he began to squall in pain. Harry tried to form words but found his mouth and throat not obeying him. The only sound he could make was a loud, racking cry of pain and fear. However, it seemed to be enough.

“I heard something over there!” A male voice shouted, booming and authoritarian, but worried, almost distraught.

Blinking, Harry opened his eyes and stared all around him, seeing fire spreading nearby, with a wall smashed in nearby. *Oh, so that’s where the heat is coming from.* Then Harry looked at himself in a piece of cracked glass and realized with a sinking feeling. *Bloody hell! I really am a baby!* As that thought flitted across his mind, the pain of the fires and everything else drove all further thought out of Harry’s mind, his brain coming undone once more.

It would be quite some time before Harry’s mind was his own once more. After all, a baby’s mind was not formed enough to allow for complex thoughts or even many memories. Later Harry would be very thankful for this, although not as happy as what little self-consciousness he had left had in feeling the sensation of being picked up out of his cradle and carried away before that portion of Harry’s mind also faded.

scene break

Guld Arc, the current patriarch of the Arc Family, stared down at the little baby, noticing his black hair, almost like his wife's hair, and the emerald eyes which were now staring around him. The baby had fallen silent as he looked around, making little baby noises, the kind Guld could well remember from his own kids. With a shake of his head, he looked around, hefting his glaive, Long Tom, in one hand, scowling around him as he returned to where his wife was being looked after.

As he arrived, he found his brother, Paul growling out questions, his fury plain to see. Paul wasn't the only one currently furious, of course. *God damn it, how did the Grimm gather in such strength with no warning!? And what the hell happened to the defensive guns?!*

That was indeed what Paul Arc, a tall, spare man with handsome features currently twisted into a snarl, was questioning the local police about. "And we still have no idea why no one spotted the Grimm? Or what the hell happened to the wall guns?"

The 'why' of the Grimm gathering was obvious to the Hunters gathered here. There had been a major bandit raid on a nearby town. The survivors of that attack had been evacuated during the attack, with hundreds of wounded practically invading this small, not very well-maintained hospital at the tip of Mistral. It was the kind of periphery hospital that survived on a month-to-month basis and never had much of anything but determination.

Heck, if I could have gotten Hazel to any other hospital, I would have done it, Guld admitted ruefully. As it was, they'd only arrived and been seen to by an obstetrician a few hours before groups of Hunters began to arrive with the survivors of the bandit assault.

Of those survivors, many had died in despair, a few women had been left alone and killed themselves after what they had been through, and still, others had been stopped joining them. To the Grimm, that had been like setting out meat for a wild dog.

The policeman was scared still, staring at Paul and the gathered Hunters as if they were just as terrifying as the Grimm. "Er, um, the, the guns on the walls, um, some of them didn't have any ammunition. Others had really poor maintenance. I, I d, don't know what..."

"Rest assured, there will be an investigation," another, more poised local said smoothly. "Frankly, the fact the ammunition is missing, and indeed there's no record of where it was actually stored but that it was indeed bought, smells of corruption to me."

Paul and the other Hunters just stared at the second man, whose name none of them had bothered to learn. After a few silent moments, he looked away, shivering. But before any of the Hunters could say anything, the baby in Guld's arms giggled and reached up, grabbing at his beard.

"And what's that you have there, husband?" Hazel arc asked, smiling somewhat weakly as he joined them. After all, it had only been a few hours since she'd given birth. If not for her

Aura sustaining her, Hazel would be unconscious or at least unable to concentrate on anything around her. As it was, she still couldn't move.

"I was going through the hospital again to make certain we had gotten all the survivors out. I found him in the ruins of the emergency wing. It's a miracle that he survived at all, but I didn't see any sign of who his mother was or even a note about his parentage on the bed."

One of the surviving doctors was quickly found, but the man was a surgeon and had never seen the baby before. "And well, our records were in there, somewhere," he mumbled, still somewhat in shock as he gestured to the burning hospital. It wasn't the only one, admittedly, but it had been where he had been working up to the events of today.

"That's a pity," Hazel sighed, then held up a finger in front of the baby's face, watching as he grabbed at the finger with both tiny hands, cooing in delight. "Hehe, look at him! What a happy little baby."

The baby already in her arms looked up and saw Harry. She then made the first sound she'd made since she had stopped crying earlier, holding one tiny hand out towards Harry. "Gbababa..."

"Aw, look, Tia thinks he's a playmate," Hazel cooed, leaning down to kiss her baby's head, then looked back up at her husband and the baby he was holding, who was also looking back at young Tia. "You know, we could adopt him. He's young enough that we could just make him Tia's twin. You've said twins run in your family, after all."

Paul and Guld both chuckled at that. After all, although they looked very different, that was what they were.

"We already have two babies at home and two other kids. You really think taking in another child is a smart thing to do?" The man asked, although his tone was more amused than dismissive.

"Why not? I wager that Saffron and Violet would get a kick out of having a little boy to spoil," Hazel giggled.

Guld chuckled, scratching at his beard and looking at his brother. "Well then, what about..."

"Oh, hell no!" Paul held up his arms in an X pattern. "I like kids well enough, but you do not want me to watch a baby, twin of mine. Not only am I not responsible enough but trying would wreck my lifestyle something fierce."

"Cough, manwhore, cough, cough!" Hazel 'coughed', but Paul merely grinned at her. It was true, after all. Paul was a player and didn't care who knew it.

“Hmm... then what will the others think when we bring a black-haired boy home? All of us are blond, after all.”

“Ha, all of you are blond! I’ll be quite happy that there will be someone else around with my hair color,” Hazel retorted. “And I won’t have you teasing him about it. Overmuch, anyway.”

Nodding, Guld gave in to the inevitable. And honestly, his objections had been more for form’s sake than anything else. They could certainly bring in another kid easily enough. “What should we name him?”

“Hadrian?” Paul answered, surprising the married couple. As they looked at him, he shrugged. “It was our grandfather’s name, after all.”

“Hadrian...” Hazel mused, then nodded. “It’s a good name.”

“Hadrian it is. Welcome to the family then, Hadrian Arc.”

scene break

The next few years passed in a blur to Harry. This was a good thing, considering this time included things like having his diapers changed, breastfeeding, and many other things that no man or woman could ever truly remember and still be sane. Harry knew he had playmates, someone like himself who could only crawl around instead of walk, who Harry called Twia, while she called him Haddy. Another playmate was older, able to walk and speak far better. Her name for those few first years was Turi to both the babies. She picked him and the other playmate and seemed to like to cuddle, which was more than fine by baby Harry for those first few years.

When Harry was two years old, something happened that got through his normal happy baby/toddler mind. The adult woman who his baby mind called Mom became rounder and slower. No longer was she so eager to run around and play with him and his other playmates. Indeed, she was a lot less fun. But that still left the big beard and Turi, so Harry was still happy.

Ten months later, another Arc girl came into the world.

At six years old, Arturia was the youngest of the trio of girls allowed to pick up the little baby. She was a pale-skinned girl who was extremely energetic for her age and smart to boot, just like all her siblings. She had blonde hair, as did all of them bar their mom and young Harry, who had quickly become Arturia’s favorite toy. Although in her opinion, Arturia’s hair, a light blonde bordering on silver, was far superior to the straw and honey blonde of her older siblings.

Now faced with another baby, Arturia still remembered how she had been told babies were breakable and held the newest Arc gently, rocking her from side to side, as her older siblings, Violet and Saffron, looked on. At the same time, Harry and Tia toddled over, staring.

Arturia nodded at them, happy to see they were now walking. It seemed as if her lessons were going well.

Arturia held the baby out to the toddlers, admonishing them. "Do not pull or tug at her. She is too young to play with yet."

"What is her name?" Violet asked, smirking at Arturia's tone of command. *Heh, I wonder if she sees the twins as siblings or little servants and toys?*

"Magenta," Guld said with a smile, leaning down and taking the baby from Arturia. "Magenta Arc."

The baby looked extremely tiny in his large hands, almost comically something Harry noticed somehow, causing the boy to giggle. Guld grinned at his son, then looked down at the baby as she opened her eyes. Magenta looked up at his face and then reached out, tugging at his beard. He winced a little, sending a pout at all the other kids. Even Saffron was there, taking time off of her first year in middle school. "Why is it none of you have ever been able to look past my beard?"

"Because it's extremely tuggable!" Arturia answered crisply, and the other kids giggled at their dad's woe-be-gone expression, even the toddlers making happy noises.

Harry laughed with them as his mind came together once more. He found his eyes trailing back to the baby, who noticed the others then. She looked at them with wide eyes, and he waved at Magenta, the most he could do at the moment.

A similar moment happened three years later. Hadrian was then five years old and could think of bits and pieces of his past life as Harry, but his mind wasn't yet fully formed to understand everything Harry had gone through. So, Hadrian simply treated his time as Harry as dreams and kept them to himself. This was reinforced by the fact that in those memories, the moon had been one huge circle, unlike in this world, where it was lots of little pieces.

What was more important was that his mom had gotten round again, something that Harry commented on at lunchtime. "Dad, do you think Momma could use a diet?" He asked innocently.

The laughter from all the other family members around the table, even Momma, caused Harry to blink in question before shrugging it off and asking, "Can I help in the kitchen tonight?"

And then, ten months later, another two arcs came into the world. Rose and Rouge Arc were another pair of girls and were, apparently, going to be the last kids Guld and Hazel would have. At least, if the shouting Harry and Tia overheard was any indication.

More and more as he grew up, Harry's past personality continued to come out as his mind matured in fits and starts, his present 'child self' merging seamlessly with his older self. As this process continued, Harry made the choice to not act as mature as he could. His first

childhood, after all, had been abysmal. Why not have fun with this second childhood as best he could?

When he was nine, Harry's mind started to truly merge Hadrian Arc's current memories and self with his past self as Harry Potter. No longer did they appear as fantastical dreams, but true memories, ones he could draw on, but which did not define his new sense of self. By then, Harry's relationships with his family were mostly set, especially with his siblings, all of whom Harry was very close to.

Saffron was the oldest. She was nine years older than Harry when he first... arrived... joined the family? Harry wasn't sure how to describe it and couldn't remember anything from that time in this new world. Saffron was nearly finished high school now, testing for college. She had talked excitedly about a career in law, yet Saffron had always enjoyed having Harry around despite her much older age, spoiling him mightily. That had faded as time went by, but Saffron was still excitable and boisterous, reminding Harry somewhat poignantly of Tonks.

At sixteen, the second oldest was Violet, and in contrast to Saffron, she had no plans to go to college. Instead, she had already begun to work on the Arc Estate, dropping out of High school to do so. Indeed, she was, generally speaking, 'officially' in charge of the gardens, although she was still more of a figurehead as she learned on the job from the older farmhands and managers. Regardless of her lack of experience, Violet was hip-deep in the local farming scene, of which the Arcs were a leading family, and her bluff, cheery attitude reminded Harry of Oliver Wood somehow.

From what Harry had learned, the Arc family was known just as much for farming as they were for producing Hunters. That was why the town the estate was a part of Evig Låga, an autonomous town on the outskirts of Mistral in the Anima continent. The town had been founded by their family generations ago when they had been even more of a clan than they were now.

Since Harry had two uncles and an aunt who lived elsewhere in the town, the idea there might have been more Arcs in the past was surprising. None of them lived on the main property. From what Harry had overheard, his dad had been given the main property as the oldest of the siblings and the first one to marry, although Guld always looked sad about that when it came up in conversation.

Harry knew that his father and Uncle Paul were very close, while he had a more distant relationship with Uncle Samson and Aunt Stacy. Samson had two kids, both boys who were farmers and great friends with Violet but not very good with the younger set. And the less said about Aunt Stacy, the better, in Harry's opinion. In his mind, she was way too much like Petunia had been in his old life.

In terms of how she got along with the younger kids, Violet was also much fairer in who she spoiled among the younger set than Saffron, who very clearly played favorites. Violet also

had far less time for them during the day since she was working, although she enjoyed having the kids help around the property.

Harry could make Violet out now from where he was sitting on a comfy, well-padded and round windowsill. Tall and broad-shouldered, almost manly-looking, Violet had short-cropped wheat-colored hair and bulging muscles like the Arc patriarch, although her face was almost an exact copy of their mother's save the hair. She was talking to several other men and then moved off purposefully with them towards the apple trees in the distance.

Heh, and in direct contrast to Vi, we have Maggie, the family's Hermione. Harry turned his head to look across the room where Magenta, or Maggie, was ensconced in one of the other windowsills. She had a large book in front of her and didn't look up when she felt Harry's eyes on her, pushing her glasses up her nose and continuing to ignore the world around her.

Maggie was blonde like all of Harry's other siblings, but unlike Violet, Tia or Saffron, she, like Arturia, wore her hair in an extremely intricate style. In Maggie's case, this was a twin braid style that fell down either side of her chest. Unlike her older siblings, she was also utterly uninterested in anything but reading. And despite Magenta being only seven years old, Harry could not see that changing anytime soon.

Still, she was also one of what Hazel called 'the four snuggle bunnies', given how she liked to be hugged and cuddle with the other younger set instead of boss them around as Hermione might have in Magenta's place. The other three were Harry, of course, Arturia, and Tia, since Rouge and Rose were mere 'snuggle toys' still. It was also no secret that the three of them were the closest friends among the siblings. Even with Arturia going to school to become a Hunter this year, she still exercised and simply hung out with the twins whenever she could.

Harry hopped to his feet with a smile, moving towards the stairs. It was far too nice a day out to spend any more time inside than he had to. *And since I'm stuck as a kid again, then by god, I will enjoy it,* Harry thought not for the first time. Yet the number of times he had thought that did not detract from the sheer enjoyment of it.

"Where are you going?" Tia asked from behind him, looking up from her own work. But unlike Maggie, Tia was doing her homework.

"I'm done our work for the day, so I figured I'd go get you a snack for when you are. And then maybe we can go exploring." Harry announced. While this world didn't seem to have an elementary school system (or if they did, Evig Låga didn't have one), Hazel and the other adults had created daily lessons for the kids to work on. It was up to the kids when to do it per day, but they had to finish by dinner or get no dessert and lose privileges the next day.

Tia's eyes widened very slightly. Harry had never seen Tia become overly emotional or emotive. She just didn't seem able to express emotions as clearly as other children could. But Harry could read her aquamarine eyes as easily as any book. She was one of his two best

friends among his siblings, his playmate and other half. It was very odd to see either of them without the other for any length of time.

Now Tia nodded her head rapidly and then went back to reading. Her eyes narrowed in what would be a ferocious expression of concentration for anyone else. Maggie's giggle nearly broke that concentration, and Harry looked over to his younger sibling, who had looked up from her book as the twins spoke. But now, she simply smiled at them both before going back to her book.

Magenta then squeaked a little when Harry paused coming back in his snack for Tia to rub her head, but she otherwise ignored the twins as Tia finished her work, finished the snack - dried apple bits - and hopped to her feet.

The two of them left Maggie there with a promise to come and get her for dinner later. If they didn't, she'd keep reading. Then they were out the door racing along with the sprawling estate beyond. As they began to explore the grounds, Harry reflected that the word 'sprawling' worked for both the estate and the mansion of the Arc family lived in.

It wasn't as if it had been built as a mansion originally. You could still see in the entryway to the small house built there originally. It had been added to over time, each addition a different kind of architecture that Harry's mind could now notice. For example, the adult's bedrooms (the master bedroom and a guest bedroom and a bedroom for Uncle Paul although he was rarely around) was a second-story built on the small, one-story original house. It was smaller in length and built out of wood and masonry rather than stone like the original. This had let the first story be turned into a few sitting rooms, a tiny library, a large kitchen and a dining room.

Another segment was connected to one side of the central house through a second-story walkway to a four-story set of rooms. These rooms each had their own tiny changing area and toilet area and were for the older set of kids – Saffron and Violet - and still more guests. The first story of that segment was a large bathing area the entire family used. This segment honestly had a strange, foreign look, unlike any building Harry had seen back in his old life. The building was made of wood slats rather than perpendicular logs, had dark hues and weird sliding doors made of paper on the inside.

The section where the younger kids lived sprawled to one side of the main section out and around a giant tree, making their area a literal treehouse connected to the main house by an actual rope bridge that Tia, Harry and Arturia loved to jump on to make it bounce. As for the rest of the treehouse? It was perhaps the coolest thing Harry had ever seen, and not a day went by without Harry and Tia climbing in or out of the windows there. It had a lot of little nooks and crannies like the one that the two of them had just been in a moment ago with Maggie. It was made so haphazardly that it again seemed obvious to Harry that people had just built them over time as the Arc family grew. The twins were a little too young to get the most out of it, but Harry was looking forward to when Rouge and Rose were old enough to go exploring with him.

Harry and Tia had explored every bit of their area by this point, and now, since they were allowed out onto the grounds so long as they didn't go near the outer walls, the two of them raced through the grass, heading towards one of the small copse of trees on the property. Each copse of trees bore a different kind of nut or fruit, but regardless of that made for great places to explore and have fun.

As they ran, Harry could see those walls from where he was despite them being a good ways away. This was because they were not the normal type of walls one might expect back in the United Kingdom. Instead, these were two-story affairs made of stone and steel. Before he entered the tree line, Harry even noticed guns in different places.

He knew why too. Even as young as they were, Tia and Harry had been told about the Grimm, and they, like all their siblings before them, had begun training in self-defence. But unlike Violet and Saffron, the twins, like Arturia, greatly enjoyed it and were looking forward to more training in the future, already dreaming of being Hunters. Violet had apparently thought about going that route as well but had decided against it.

The estate's walls marked the outer edges of a square on two sides of what was actually a good-sized town. The Arc estate was on one of the two corners of that town, with the outer wall continuing both ways. On the other edge was another estate. It was an apartment complex for many middle-aged and younger people, some of whom were Hunters. Harry had seen it a few times when he was out on the town with his parents. The defense on the other side was a fast-flowing and **very** deep river, its sides lined with stones, spikes, and a few pillboxes scattered along the shoreline.

Harry had been there a week ago with his dad, trying to fish for their dinner. They'd failed and had instead bought some fish in the nearby market.

The twins continued to explore for a time until a shout from Violet drew their attention. "Hey, you two, if you've got that much energy, come and help us here. We need some tree climbers."

The twins looked at one another and were off like a shot towards their older sibling. Life, Harry decided, was really, **really** good here.

Later that night, Harry sat up with Maggie, who refused to put her book down until she finished it, leaning against one side of him. It was a colored book of some kind of dragon vs. knight tale. Although in this world, the dragon was replaced by a Grimm. Maggie had said it was actually a history book of the family made into a picture book for kids. She had found it in one of the highest segments of the treehouse stuck under a chair.

Harry looked at it and occasionally read over Maggie's shoulder, earning him several elbow jabs. If there was one thing that annoyed Maggie, it was other people reading over her head. But when he moved away, Maggie grabbed his arm and cuddled in. Harry's other arm had long since gone to sleep thanks to Arturia falling asleep against his shoulder.

Arturia was not a morning person and had to get up very early to be taken to Lighthouse, a Hunter school, by one of their parents in the family bullhead, along with Saffron. Because of that, she was always even more cuddly than usual at night.

Tia was pinning his legs down, reading a comic book he had already finished reading.

With no chance of getting up anytime soon and no hands to hold a book of his own, Harry waited for one of the parents to realize there were still lights on in the children's area of the mansion and instead of trying to escape, leaned his head lightly against the top of Maggie's, reveling in the cuddle pile, even as his mind went elsewhere.

So, the Grimm are the enemy I'm supposed to fight, but I haven't seen any sign that there's such a major issue as Death warned me about. I mean, yeah, there's a lot of them, and there's no chance of humanity reclaiming the majority of the planet anytime soon. But there's got to be more to it than that. Regardless, they are a threat to humanity, and I'd probably be a hunter anyway, even without promising to do something about that issue. Harry knew he had an over-inflated people-saving thing.

Yet, there is a problem, he thought, his lips quirking wryly even as he nuzzled into the top of Maggie's head, hearing her hum in pleasure despite not looking up from the book. *Where the heck is my magic?*

By this point in his past life, Harry knew that he had caused accidental magic incidents at least a few times a week. But here, he hadn't seen any sign of a similar thing. None at all. That was weird and a little worrisome. *Does magic not work here like it did back on earth?*

Later, once Maggie's reading had been interrupted and she, despite her protests, had been put into bed by their mom, Harry lay awake. Tia was nuzzled into his back as per normal. The twins had slept in the same bed ever since Harry could remember, and occasionally if she wasn't sore from training or had a lot of homework, Arturia would join them.

The older girl claimed that Harry was nice and warm, and his warmth helped her sleep. Harry didn't think that was the whole truth, although it was true that she seemed to enjoy having something, or in this case, someone, in bed to bite in the morning. Many a time, Harry had been woken up by Arturia nomming on his head.

Once certain his sister wasn't going to wake up, Harry held out his hand over the edge of the bed and began to concentrate. The Lumos spell was one of the earliest spells Harry had ever learned. Harry knew how the spell should go. He had been able to create it wandlessly and had routinely used it in the past.

With spells, there were three components. And no, wand-waving was not one of them. Indeed, from Harry's own experiments, Harry believed that wand-waving or any kind of gesture was only used early on to help. After that, it wasn't necessary, and the fact so few knew this was a sign there was some other social reason behind the need for wands.

One component was intent, the second was will, and the third was concentration. Of course, many spells also needed power, but this one shouldn't. Harry had the intent to create the spell. He had the will to impose his will on the world around him. He also could concentrate enough to keep the image of what he wanted in his mind.

How long Harry held out his hand like that, he didn't know, but nothing happened. Eventually, Harry simply closed his eyes, twisting around in Tia's grip, flinging an arm around her in turn, her hair smelling like a mix of evergreen and grass. The smell calmed him down somewhat, letting him think about what he had learned more calmly.

His magic wasn't answering his call. Indeed, Harry couldn't tell if he had magic at all just yet. *But Death promised me I would. Something weird is happening here, something more than I knew about before coming here. Damn, would it have killed Death to tell me more about this... crud.* Harry fought the urge to facepalm. *I didn't even think to ask, did I? Ruddy hell, Hermione was right about me always charging forward too much.*

That 'something weird', Harry learned about a year later, a year spent trying to find his magic once every few weeks. Harry probably should have pushed to learn more about what could possibly be blocking his magic than just trying the same thing again and again, but Harry was simply having too much fun in this, his second childhood, to care overmuch about the lack of magic or anything else. Being part of a family was just too much fun!

Indeed, something much more important than whatever long-term issue he was here to fight happened over that time: Harry began to help their mom in the kitchen. That was the only thing Harry had ever enjoyed when he lived with the Dursleys and had learned early on that one pisses off a cook at your peril. Not that the Dursleys, with their pallets forever ruined by the number of fat things they ate, could ever tell.

"Hadrian," a feminine voice interrupted him from one side, and Harry turned to see two of his sisters, Tia and Arturia.

"Arturia, you're back!" He said, hopping to his feet. The moment he did, both girls' arms were around him, and he hugged them just as tightly, taking in their appearance. "How was the trip to the tournament?"

As always, the expressions on their faces were a strange mirror of one another. While Arturia was smiling and happy looking, if in a somewhat contained way, Tia was almost unemotional save for the small movements of her mouth and eyes. Arturia had golden eyes, which could be intimidating, and appeared cold to most people even if she was smiling.

In contrast, Tia's aquamarine eyes were by far the most expressive eyes Harry could remember ever seeing in this life for his last. It always amazed him when the rest of the family thought she wasn't emotional. All you had to do was look at her eyes or mouth, and you would know how Tia was feeling. Although he knew that Arturia was somewhat less emotive around people outside their family, she didn't take it to such an extreme as Tia did.

They were both blonde-haired, although Arturia's hair was on the really light side of blonde, almost like gold mixed with platinum. Tia's was on the darker side of blonde, pure gold. This was further offset by the girl's skin. Arturia was pale-skinned, like someone who spent little to no time outside despite that not being the case. Tia was tanned, far more than any other Arc, either in their immediate or extended family. Even Violet, who spent most of her days outside.

"It was interesting. The fights were fun, but it wasn't as fun as if you had been with us. The food was horrible except for the popcorn. They put some kind of hot sauce on one version of it."

"Heh, I'll remember that for the next time we watch a movie," Harry laughed, watching as Tia's eyes sparkled at him, and her arms tightened before she let him go.

"And I noticed you're not grounded anymore?" Arturia questioned archly, pulling back from the group hug as well, one eyebrow rising in interrogation.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not allowed into the training room, but it wasn't like I was trying to make trouble. I just hurt myself a bit."

"Yes, well, that's what happens when you nearly break your back trying to pick up the Family Blade. I'm surprised you were able to do it at all," Arturia grumbled, poking Harry in the chest as she glared at him with all the censoriousness of a fifteen-year-old big sister.

"I think it was more because he was able to sneak into the training room so well, rather than the fact he nearly threw out his back, sister. He was able to lift the Family Blade in the first place, after all," Tia interjected with a smirk.

The blade in question was a longsword of a somewhat simple design. It was about three feet long, the edge still sharp despite not having felt a whetstone as far back as anyone living could remember. Its hilt was bound by blue leather, protected by a raised handguard which looked like gold. The sides of the handguard were marked by a slight upwards reaching hook, and the hilt ended in a small pommel stone.

Created in some fashion that had long since been lost, the sword somehow weighed far, far more than it appeared. Normally only those with Aura or at least a potential for having a lot of it could lift the blade at all. It had been passed down in the Arc family for generations, but none of the current Hunters were longsword users, which meant it spent most of the time on the wall in the family's training area, a small gym set a way away from the main house.

"Exactly. Besides," Harry said teasingly, "it isn't as if you didn't have any childhood accidents like that."

Arturia turned away, but both of her siblings could see the pout on her face even so. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Harry shook his head, then put his arms around both of their shoulders. As he glanced towards the clock, blinking in surprise. “Wow, it’s already dinner time? We should get going.”

Both of them nodded in eager agreement. Something both girls, and indeed all of Harry’s sisters, had in common was big appetites. He wasn’t certain where they put it all since none of them seemed to gain any weight where they shouldn’t, but he wasn’t about to question things like that.

The moment they entered the main house, the smell of dinner, some kind of chicken meal hit them, and Harry eagerly left his two closest sisters to help their dad at the table while he made his way to the kitchen. Entering the kitchen, Harry smiled as his mom turned towards him, grinning cheerfully over her shoulder as his oldest sibling Saffron also turned and gave Harry a wink. “There’s our new helper. I can’t believe you’re actually volunteering for kitchen duty, kiddo. I know I wasn’t willing to do work in the kitchen until I was fifteen.”

“I like the idea of cooking. It’s fun. Kind of like chemistry, only you get to eat your experiment,” Harry answered with a laugh, causing his mom to smile and lean down to kiss him on the cheek before going into a prepared spiel about the knives not being toys, the proper care of them and so forth.

Despite knowing all of that – mostly through trial and error admittedly since Petunia had never cared enough to teach him – Harry listened intently, staring up at his mother with a wide smile. Hazel Arc was the only one besides Harry in the family who was black-haired. Her hair cascaded in a long spiral down her chest, a somewhat large chest, if the semi-jealous talks from the estate workers were any indication.

Currently, Hazel was wearing an apron that matched her hair in color. She and Arturia both preferred darker colors, although Harry preferred brown and burnt umber and foresty colors like that. She was also a little short for a woman, so much so both Saffron and Violet were taller than her. Everyone else in the family was a shade of blonde and having that point of solidarity helped Harry feel at home every time he saw his mom, although he, apparently, got his emerald eyes from his father’s side of the family in this world.

Or at least as far as he or his siblings knew. By this point, even the elder Arcs had forgotten that Harry wasn’t their natural-born child.

Similarly, Guld Arc was as large as his voice had seemed to baby Harry. He was tall but looked almost squat thanks to how much muscle he had, something he was showing off now as he hefted Magenta, Tia and the two babies on one shoulder as if they weighed next to nothing, which to him they might as well have. He had a bright yellow beard, coming down to the top of his chest, although Harry knew for a fact that he routinely shaved. He could grow that beard back within three weeks, something that, like his mom’s figure among the ladies, had some of the young men who worked on the estate quite jealous.

“Anyway, I’ve got chicken on the cutting board here, but I need you to cut up the croutons for me Harry, as well as some of the vegetables for the soup,” Hazel instructed. “I’m going to be working on the pie.”

Harry nodded and moved over quickly to the cutting board, which he instantly flipped over, showing Hazel he had been listening to her about cross-contamination. Then he very carefully selected the right knife for the job, then began to cut the rosemary thyme-hardened bread into croutons, each of them a different size and shape. That would add to the flavor. With them done, he switched knives and started on the vegetables.

Watching him carefully, Hazel smiled. *My word, but he has been learning, hasn’t he? I wonder...* Smiling, Hazel began to ask Harry some cooking questions and quickly became delighted. “You’ve been reading cookbooks, haven’t you?”

Harry nodded since that was an excellent cover for his skills. He wasn’t about to try and hide them after all. Harry liked cooking, and he wanted to help, and that was that. By the time the soup was done, Harry had convinced Hazel. “From now on, Harry, if you want, you can help me with every meal. Make it two months without any accidents in the kitchen, and we can start to experiment!”

Moments later, Hazel set the plate of croutons down on the table then hopped into one of the seats with extra pads for the kids, smiling happily as his sister Tia settled in next to him, scooting her chair next to his as he did the same. The two chairs clacked together, causing them both to smile at the ritual, Harry’s smile a wide beam, Tia’s small but warm, while Arturia chuckled on Harry’s other side.

Their dad completed the ritual as he shook his head. “You two should watch out, you don’t have enough elbow space.”

“I’m left-handed. Tia’s right, so that doesn’t matter,” Harry answered with a smile, as Tia nodded, making a mmm sound.

“And what is your excuse Arturia?” Guld asked mock-seriously.

“I am simply that coordinated it won’t matter, Father,” Arturia answered easily before her stomach started to growl.

“Gaaaah lion!!!” Harry joked, looking around wildly before calming down. “Oh wait, it’s just Queen Tury, demanding to be fed.”

“Mmmm...” Tia added, both twins smiling at their older sister, who tried to scowl, but couldn’t quite keep it up.

Watching this, Guld chuckled but then joked, “One of these days, you’re going to have to let Tia speak up for herself when you’re around, Harry. She can’t go through life letting you do most of the talking for her.”

Tia's mouth crinkled just slightly as she sent Guld a smile in turn. It wasn't that she couldn't speak. It was just she preferred to let Harry take the lead, and when she spoke, she preferred to do so only with the other kids. "Challenged accepted."

The rest of the Arc family laughed, even Rouge and Rose getting into it though they didn't know why everyone was laughing. Quickly they settled down to another meal, which earned Harry praise for his cooking skills for the first time in this world or even his original world.

This was followed by Tia and Harry heading up to the room they shared. That had been a kind of awkward moment when Harry's mind began to reform, realizing that he was sharing a room with a girl. And yet, despite the incongruity of sharing a room with a girl young enough to be his sister back in his previous life, Harry wouldn't trade it for the world. The closeness the twins shared was great fun, and Harry knew that he had never been closer to anyone before as he was to his siblings, not even Ron and Hermione at the height of their friendship.

The room had two beds, two dresses, two tiny tables for when they started school, bears, dolls, and quite a few robot Hunter toys, the equivalent of a G.I. Joe action figure back in Harry's old world. Already Tia was pulling out some toys, settling them down into position.

Harry quickly took one of the robot Hunters, saying allowed "I'll let you come up with the scenario if you let me play the hero this time."

Tia seemed to think about it, then began without preamble. Just because she didn't like to speak a lot with other people didn't mean she was unwilling to do so when it was just the two of them. "Your name is Vladimir. You lead team Velcro, and..."

Magenta was in her room reading while Arturia had begun her homework. But hearing the tale Tia was spinning both came in and decided to join in on the fun. Magenta picked up the tale letting the others play with the toys as she directed them like a little stage manager. Arturia took the villain's part facing off against Harry's hero, while Tia handled the other characters. She was joined in this by the young Rouge and Rose, with Magenta taking their mumbles and words into consideration as she spun the tale.

Eventually, the younger ones started to fall asleep, and Arturia picked them up one by one sitting them into Harry's bed, which caused him to smile even though he didn't open his eyes. His smile widened as Arturia joined them, throwing her arm and leg over the others, nuzzling into Harry's hair. *Cuddle pile, yes!* For someone as touch-starved as Harry had been in his last life, this kind of thing was pure bliss.

When the two Arc adults checked in on them, they found all their children in the same room, toys strewn everywhere, causing Hazel to frown. But the sight of the group of kids all piled together with Harry and Tia in the center was too cute for her to remain angry at. "I think that we've been doing a good job with this lot so far," Guld announced, winking at his wife.

“Good to hear, but don’t expect to add another to the crowd. We’ve already got a whole menagerie as it is,” Hazel said with a laugh.

Chapter 1: A Duty Accepted

A year later, Harry learned what might be happening with his magic. One day, their father called Harry and Tia into the gym. They found him and Arturia there, with Arturia standing next to her dad and holding a training spear. She looked at her siblings, winking at them but didn’t otherwise acknowledge the little smiles they sent her way. This was serious business.

Guld gestured for Tia and Harry to stand in front of him, smiling faintly. Although to Harry’s eyes, he also seemed a little sad. “You both have learned about Dust, about how Hunters use it in our internal battle against the Grimm. But there is another weapon that every Hunter, which sets us apart from normal people, makes us stronger, faster, far more durable. And... more noticeable to the Grimm.”

Harry’s brows furrowed at that, but he didn’t look away from Guld as the hand he was holding out began to glow, his eyes widening. *I, is that magic!? But then, what did Death mean when he said this world needed a new influx of magic?*

Abruptly, Arturia whirled, putting her entire body behind a swirling strike from her spear into her father’s lower stomach. Even a large man like Guld couldn’t take a blow like that to his diaphragm without feeling it, but he didn’t even so much as blink. The light around his hand continued to gleam, and the Arc patriarch smiled. “You didn’t hold back at all, did you, Arturia? I’m still not going to up your allowance, you know, no matter how much you want me to.”

“HMMF! And I say Father that only twenty dollars a month is tyranny!” Arturia growled, this time going for a stabbing blow down at Guld’s foot. “Down with the tyrant!”

Guld moved his foot slightly so that instead of striking the top of his foot directly, it skidded along the side of his foot. Even so, it should have cut into Guld’s shoe and foot, but instead, it skidded off them as if it had hit a solid metal sheet.

“Ow,” Guld drawled, holding his still glowing hand to his heart. “That hurts, right here, darling.”

Arturia pouted, and while Harry and Tia smiled at their byplay, Guld turned back to them, one more holding out his glowing hand. “This is Aura. It is what truly separates a Hunter from a simple soldier or policeman. It is our soul, our will, made manifest. And as you just saw at its base, Aura acts as a passive shield about a centimeter away from our bodies. Which includes our clothing, for the most part.”

“It also enhances our strength and physical abilities.” Arturia took up the explanation so seamlessly that Harry wondered if his dad and older sister had practiced this spiel, quite unlike the earlier example. “People with good control of their Aura can further heighten one aspect or

another. One of my classmates likes to enhance his speed and eyesight, so he's always able to gain distance and act as a sniper. And if you do that often when you are young like us, your body will also be enhanced to a certain degree in that same direction. Another uses his Aura to manifest his pure strength and is already as large as most grown men."

Harry looked at his Dad, who chuckled and shook his head, but his tone was serious as he answered the unasked question. "The downside of doing that kind of thing is that your Aura gets out of the habit of helping you in other ways. That's why in our family, we don't awaken our children's Aura until around twelve or thirteen, so they don't make decisions on that score they might regret."

"Basically, right after you hit puberty, which did not make that time any more fun for me than it already was," Arturia interjected, this time much more morosely, as she attempted to bring the butt end of her spear around to crash into her father's throat. But he caught it easily, and while his other hand ruffled her hair, Guld pulled the spear out of her grip with ease. As good as Arturia was for her age group, and she was the top of the freshman class at her school and working her way through the sophomores like a hot knife through butter, she was still young. While Guld was an extremely experienced Hunter.

"Our family has always maintained that a young person, be it a girl or boy, should be mature enough to understand that Aura isn't a toy and is something that you should be very careful about using too much to enhance any single physical aspect of your body. It's always best to just let Aura do its own business to a certain degree, and you work on your basic skills. And your Semblance when you find it." Guld held up a hand dramatically to one ear. "But Hark, what is Semblance, I hear you ask?"

Arturia allowed herself a chuckle at that, while Tia too smiled slightly, and Harry? Harry was staring at Guld avidly, his eyes gleaming, and Guld could tell that his mind was going a mile a minute. That was about what Guld had expected. Even as young as he was, Harry had already proved he had an extremely sharp mind, especially for tactics.

"While Aura is the power of will and our bodies united, a Semblance is something different. They are interconnected, with a Semblance taking its power from an individual's Aura, but a Semblance is something else entirely. Nearly all of them are unique, although a few tend to run in families. We don't have a family Semblance, so each of yours will be distinctive."

"Although the Arc family has been known as Aura monsters. We have a lot more Aura than most, but that isn't something you should lord over others." He wagged a finger at them, then purposefully glared over to Arturia.

Arturia huffed, looking away, but Harry could see a patch of red on her cheeks. "I don't know what you're talking about, Father."

“Sure, you don’t,” Guld drawled, rolling his eyes and then very deliberately reaching out to ruffle Arturia’s hair again, causing her to turn and hiss at him like a cat. He chuckled at that and turned back to the other kids, who had been silent, waiting for him to go on.

“A Semblance is, as I said, something unique to the individual. When you first discover it, usually there is some kind of singular moment, a phrase or a thought that goes through your mind that somehow sparks your Semblance. Before you ask, no, there’s no set science, far less a plan of some kind that I could teach you to help you find your Semblance. As I said, it is a very personal thing, and finding it is also part of the unique journey that a Hunter must embark on to discover his or her full power.”

He smiled, shaking his head. “For example, mine was... Well, never mind about what my trigger was. But my Semblance is a relatively simple one to understand.” He held up his hand then karate-chopped down at the top of the dummy.

Instead of the dummy's top deforming under the hit, the dummy’s head was sliced in half by some unseen blade. The cut continued down to its crotch; the thing bisected in two.

As the twins gasped, Guld held up his hand, waving it in the air in front of the dummy. Now the two of them could see the shape of some kind of blade there, which had not been visible a moment ago. “I call it Silent Edge. As long as I have access to my Aura, I can create a blade of cutting force like this that can cut through anything but another person’s Aura with ease.”

“Can you use it just from your hands or any part of your body? Does it have to be a blade, or can you alter the shape of it?” Tia asked cocking her head to one side as she stared at the flickers of dust motes on the blade. She was fascinated, although the only sign of this was a slight widening in her eyes and one corner of her mouth twitching upwards.

“Good questions. Yes, I trained myself to use the blade from any part of my body, even my back, which has saved me a time or two, let me tell you. I can alter the size to a certain degree, although I can’t project it further away from my body than 2 feet. And I can’t alter the shape very much. I can make the blade a little thinner, a little wider, but that is all. It is still a blade rather than a spear, say. Although I can create multiples of them at once but keeping them out for more than a half-hour becomes Aura intensive, even for me.”

“What he means is that if anyone who isn’t part of our family tries that kind of thing, they better have massive Aura reserves of their own or else they’ll collapse in less than ten minutes.” Arturia gestured to a series of computers stuck in the wall that Harry had noticed before but had never been told the purpose of. “Those are Aura counters, some new technology that came out a few years ago from Atlas.”

She looked as if she was going to sneer at the last word, and Guld did sneer for a moment before they went on. Harry made a note to ask about that but listened attentively as Arturia went on. “They allow you to gauge your Aura usage, how much you have left, how much

an attack has chipped away and so forth. Although this version won't allow you to compare one person's Aura level with another. Which is probably a good thing, considering how divisive talk like that is at school."

"..." Tia slowly nodded, understanding what she was saying.

Harry remained silent. The possibilities of Aura and Semblance were running through his mind, and he wondered if perhaps he had to have his Aura unblocked before he could access his magic. That made a lot of sense to him: that his magic would act as his Semblance here on this world. Or, at the very least, be locked within his Aura.

"Right. And you can see my Aura dipped down if I use my blades for too long. And let me tell you, in comparison to the rest of my Hunter team, I had truly monster Aura reserves."

"There are a lot of rumors and foolishness around Aura that you both will need to learn about in the future when you're older," Arturia added dryly, shaking her head from side to side. She looked so weary for a moment that Harry had to grin.

He could easily understand what she was talking about there, just as Tia had a moment ago. *I have to assume that there will be jokes about Aura and certain physical characteristics and that kind of thing. Boobs for girls, and dicks for boys, no doubt.*

Unfortunately, Tia had all the tact normally associated with their age group. "What do you mean?"

"I just told you, you would learn about it later," Arturia answered repressively before reaching over to pat her little sister's head. "Don't concern yourself about that. It is not something you have to worry about for a few more years."

"Why are you mentioning all this now when we're still at least a year or more away from puberty hitting us?" Harry inquired. "Is there some way we can start to build up our Aura now even if we don't have access to it?"

"There is. There's a lot of meditation you can do that will serve you in good stead when you start interacting with your Aura, so you know if you're pushing yourself to the edge. And as Arturia said earlier, many people realize that they can use Aura to enhance one aspect of their bodies. But remember I said there's a limit to how far you can take that without leaving weaknesses elsewhere. I will teach you how to notice that kind of thing. But more importantly, there are some tricks and things you can do with Aura that most people don't know, so long as you have a good connection to your Aura in the first place. And the best way to start you along that road is meditation."

Guld led the way to a corner of the training room and gestured the twins down, sitting down in the lotus position. "So, an hour of meditation will be added to your daily training regimen. So long that is as you both still believe that you wish to become Hunters?"

Both of them made to nod, but Guld held up a hand, smiling sadly. "This is not something you should jump into so quickly, although I realize we're giving you some mixed signals here with the training we've already started to give you both. Being a Hunter isn't like being a hero in a fairy tale. Being a Hunter often forces you to make tough decisions. Decisions of who will live and who will die. Whether or not a fight is worth fighting or when to cut your losses. It is dangerous, frequently extremely depressing work. You youngsters might believe you're immortal, but you're not. And there is always, **always** more Grimm. So, while I am willing to continue to train you, I want both of you to think very seriously about this. Understood?"

The firm look he got in response from Harry was surprising. It was as if the youngster had already known all of that or had at least guessed at it but was still determined to become a Hunter, something that was surprising at Harry's age. *But then again, we knew he was smart before this and it doesn't take a genius to know that there's more to being a Hunter than the media and stories portray. Still, maybe I should introduce him to Shogi sometime soon. Not chess, damn it. Fraking Ozpin and James...*

Shaking his head of old humiliations at the chess table, Guld turned his attention on Tia. She looked a little more thoughtful if Guld was reading her expression right. But even for him, that was kind of hard in her case. Still, at least both of them would be going into the profession with their eyes wide open. "Good. Now, let us begin..."

And so it went for another year. Harry and Tia continued their education, with Magenta joining them occasionally. The younger girl's delight in reading reminded Harry somewhat of Hermione, but without the abrasiveness that, looking back on it, Harry could see in his old friend. Nor did she have the urge to share her knowledge with anyone or lord it over people.

Rather, Maggie simply enjoyed reading, and Harry noticed that Maggie also began writing little tales and stories to herself. Certainly, she enjoyed writing assignments far more than either of the twins did.

Of course, classes were kind of simple since Harry had the memories of a twenty-something-year-old (Harry refused to add his new life's years on top of his old life's). Harry had more trouble not using vocabulary and sentence structure than a pushing-eleven-year-old shouldn't be able to than anything else.

But there was a downside. Certain issues began to... arise... a bit earlier than Guld and Hazel had thought they would.

About a month after the talk about Aura, Harry woke up, feeling something stirring in his pants as Arturia pressed herself into one side and Tia into the other.

He looks down, and the sight of the small tent he was sporting down below caused his eyes to flare up as wakefulness suddenly hit Harry, and he cursed internally. Oh, bugging Shit!" His whisper cut off as Arturia's leg slowly began to shift, moving up words with her thigh slowly rising towards Harry's privates. Normally this wouldn't be an issue, her thigh would just

pass over him, and she would continue to sleep, hugging him like a koala would a tree. But as it was? *Oh god, if she wakes up and sees me like this...*

Panic flared in Harry, and he slowly shifted so that he was on his side away from Arturia, stretching so that his privates were held away from Tia on his other side and then glared downwards between their bodies. *Go down! Go down, Dumbledore in a dress, Snape naked, go down!*

The last image worked, and his hard-on disappeared quickly. With the immediate disaster averted, Harry breathed a sigh of relief, letting his eyes close as he thought about what to do about this.

This is going to be an issue. Even if I'm not attracted to them, and while I love both girls, we're way too young for that kind of thing, even if we weren't siblings. But still, stimulation like that can create a reaction.

The next day, Harry attempted to talk to Tia about no longer sharing a bed. The look she gave him was so soulful so that he caved instantly, and nearby, Maggie looked up from her book long enough to giggle. "Tia has you wrapped around her finger, doesn't she, Harry?"

"Of course," Tia announced as if she was stating the sky was blue.

Harry pouted, then laughed, reached over, and pulled Magenta into a hug, taking her book from her hands, causing her to squawk in outrage. "You're talking as if any of my sisters couldn't say the same."

Maggie laughed at that and just enjoyed the attention even as she tried to wiggle out of Harry's arms. But it was true. As the only boy in their direct family, Harry should've been the one being pampered. But if anything, the exact opposite was true. He tended to pamper the others, Maggie, Arturia, and Tia, especially since they were closest to his age.

Violet and he also had a decently close relationship, although they had little in common, as he did with Saffron, who was old enough to be more like a second mother in many ways to the youngsters. But she never really stepped into that role. Saffron was too fun-loving and gregarious.

Nonetheless, with Tia always sharing his bed and Arturia joining them quite often, Harry's issues at night continued to occur, although thankfully, they didn't happen all that often for now. After all, regardless of what age his brain was, Harry's body was still only that of an eleven-year-old. An extremely athletic eleven-year-old thanks to his family's exercise regimens and how active he was, but still, a preteen.

The twins' twelfth birthday came and went without any issues. Well, besides Harry waking up in a blonde cuddle pile once more, and with his stiffy set against Arturia's perfectly pert rear at any rate. But by this point, Harry's ability to imagine Snape naked was tried and tested, and he was able to make it go down without any difficulty.

However, several months later, Tia woke up before Harry did. This was unusual, as she tended to only get up when he started to. Tia wasn't lazy, but Tia tended to not be able to wake up immediately, and their parents had refused to allow her to use coffee or anything like that yet, saying using that kind of thing too early would stunt her growth. This morning, however, Tia woke up quickly. Indeed, very abruptly.

Opening an eye, Harry watched as she pulled back the covers, reaching underneath them for a moment. Then her face paled significantly, a stark change from her normal light caramel color.

"What's wrong?" He asked instantly, sitting up and hugging her tightly. "Nightmare?"

Slowly, Tia shook her head, turning to look at him, her eyes wide, her face startled and afraid in a way Harry had never seen from her before. "Could you go get Mom? I think... I think that puberty thing is happening."

Both twins had been given very rudimentary lessons on what puberty really was. Harry's eyes widened in turn, then he gave her a quick kiss on the cheek, rolled out of bed and ran for their mother, shouting "Mom!" as he left the treehouse behind.

Despite his brain being mentally mature, there were just some things that Harry was not going to deal with. He'd never had to deal with that kind of thing at Hogwarts beyond buying more chocolate at a certain time of the month, and he certainly wasn't going to deal with it with his own sister. *But that doesn't mean I can't help!* He thought, leaving the two of them to talk and searching out Violet, his allowance in hand.

The rest of that day, the twins walked around on tenterhooks. Beyond gratefully nomming on the chocolate Violet and Harry bought her, Tia soaked in Harry's attention like a sponge, more than a little disturbed about this first step onto the road of womanhood, and for once, everyone in the family could tell exactly how off-balance she was.

Their older siblings were extremely helpful. When she came home from school, Saffron took the lead, making a kind of tea that really helped Tia calm down. Arturia showed Tia far more physical affection than she normally would outside of when the kids were alone. And Violet and Harry helped keep Tia's spirits up while their mother made her favorite meals for the next few days. This helped, and within a few days, Tia had gotten used to the idea that her life had started to change.

The next time it happened, she was much more prepared and had the requisite equipment handy. And Harry had created a recipe for a Death by Chocolate cupcake that Tia declared worthy of becoming a national treasure.

Their mother honestly agreed, mock-whining about how, "Harry's pastry skills have passed mine! How, how has this happened?!"

However, even as she joked with the twins, Guld and Hazel made plans. Taking Tia's menstrual cycle as a sign that both twins were reaching puberty, the Arc parents knew it was time for the twins' Aura's to be unlocked.

A week later, instead of waking up normally, with Harry going down to help cook breakfast with their mother and Tia heading off to get Rouge up, the two of them were roused out of bed by their dad. "Come on, you two. Up and at them!"

Both siblings groaned, pushing themselves upright and out of one another's arms. Guld smirked that, wondering how much longer it would be before Harry's control broke and it became a little too awkward for them to share a single bed. He already had plans to add a bunk bed to their room. Guld didn't see these two deciding to go whole hog and move into different rooms. But he fully expected that once Tia began to develop more curves, the need for a separate bed would happen quite quickly.

"Why are you waking us up so early, Dad?" Harry asked as he got up out of bed. He turned away from his sister as she shifted, showing off quite a bit more stomach than was polite. He didn't notice her eyes tracking his rear, though.

"It's time to unlock your Aura, and that means we're going on a camping trip."

At that, both twins woke up quickly and leaped out of bed, moving to pack. The whole family had gone on several camping trips before, and both enjoyed the experience.

Soon enough, Harry and Tia were standing in front of the family's camp-style Bullhead. Harry thought of it as an RV that flew through the sky, although it was more of a British RV than some of the ones he had seen in pictures in his old life of ones in America. Inside was a tiny sitting room, an equally tiny bathroom, complete with a shower at the back, a small kitchen, and that was it. You could perhaps sleep in the chairs, but there wasn't enough room to actually bed out inside the RV except on the floor. And even that for only one person or a pair of twins if they were close.

After all, that was part of the point of camping: to sleep in actual tents rather than under a roof. The RV was just there to make the whole bathroom situation a little more civilized. They didn't even use the kitchen most of the time unless they couldn't catch any fish.

Normally on this world, Harry knew, most people would believe that camping out in the wilds beyond the towns and so forth was foolish, even suicidal. But most people didn't have two Hunters for parents. Both were standing by the RV, with none of his other siblings around.

This prompted Harry to ask, "Is it just the four of us?"

"That's right. This is a tradition, you two. Only the parents and the child or, in this case, children who are having their Aura unlocked go on this trip. Violet and Arturia did the same thing with us."

“And, I can stay and watch the kids for the rest of the weekend,” Saffron said with a grin, holding Rouge and Rose in her arms. The youngest Arcs wiggled, reaching out for Harry, who dutifully moved over to them, giving them hugs and promising them he’d be back by Monday. Saffron also kissed his forehead, right where his scar had been in his past life. She then did the same to Tia, wishing them luck. Saffron had never gone on this trip, having decided she didn’t want to be a Hunter early on but had heard about it from Violet and their cousins.

With farewells given and the dawn rising around them, the twins climbed into the RV, with their parents in front and the two kids in the back. They were too large to comfortably share a seat any longer, which meant they were each sitting behind a parent rather than to one side.

“Where are we going?” Harry asked.

“We’re going to a place called Arc Butte. It’s a way’s out there, and we will have to do quite a bit of hiking to get there.”

“Arc Butte? It has something to do with our family?” Tia asked with her normal monotone.

“It does indeed, darling. Or rather, the Arc side of the family, anyway. We all know that I married into this horrible bunch of blondes,” Hazel intoned before reaching over her shoulder with a fist for Harry to bump, which he did eagerly, intoning a line they had used for as long as Harry could name his colors. “Brunettes rule!”

Tia shook her head with a small smile as Harry laughed, and the two children began to ply the adults with questions about the trip. The two parents wouldn’t say much about that, only saying, “Part of the reason why we do this trip out into the wilds is to give you both your first sight of real Grimm. If you can see them, and if you don’t have second thoughts, then we will continue.”

Hazel nodded firmly, adding her words to her husband’s. “I want to make it clear; it isn’t a lack of fear we’re looking for. That would just prove you’re stupid. No, it will be controlling your fear at your first sight of Grimm that can prove you can be a hunter.”

The twins listened intently to that, then looked at one another, sharing a shrug. For his part, Harry had the experiences of his past life to call upon, so he doubted that these Grimm would cause him to feel any fear, certainly not just the sight of them anyway. And as for Tia, she took strength from Harry being there and the fact that Arturia had gone through this very same thing, along with her own conviction that she wanted to be a Hunter.

Hazel’s next words brought that to mind rather abruptly as she stated, “One thing we want you both to think about is why you want to be Hunters. At this point, I don’t think it’s because you think you want to be heroes, or that you’re thrill-seekers or any of the other shallower reasons to become a Hunter. But we still haven’t talked about your actual

motivations. We won't do so right now, but we want you to be thinking about it. Now..." She turned her chair around so that she was facing the two kids and a small box that had been set between the chairs. "Who's up for some cards?"

Unfortunately for their mother and Harry, Tia's poker face was simply unbeatable. Even Harry had trouble figuring out what she was thinking when she tried. She won practically every hand until they changed games into something Hazel called progressive gin rummy. Then Harry, with his slightly more tactical mind, began to win as Guld continued to fly them through the sky.

Occasionally a series of small guns around the RV fired, killing or warding off aerial Grimm, but there weren't many around this portion of Anima. The same volcanoes that gave the land such excellent soil also produced gases in the upper regions that seemed to eventually kill any Grimm above a certain altitude.

Around noon, the RV descended out of the sky into a small clearing. It was marked by a few signs of use, but those signs were scarce since the last time it had been used was four years ago.

The four of them spent the rest of that day and into the evening preparing the camp, playing around, and fishing in a nearby river. Guld indicated they would follow that river up into the mountains that made up a large portion of Anima's geography to get to their real destination. "This mountain in particular is called Fang splitter, which I've always thought is a rather stupid name for a mountain. Regardless, the Butte is there in the hills."

Hazel and Harry had a minor argument over who would be cooking, which ended with the two of them somehow creating a meal for Tia and Guld over an open fire that should have normally taken a full kitchen and several helpers to do: braised fish crusted with herbs and nuts, with a side of cranberry and cheese salad.

"You've both outdone yourselves!" Guld exclaimed after his first bite, pulling his wife into a hug and kissing her on the cheek before ruffling Harry's hair.

While Hazel smiled, Harry rolled his eyes, seeing that Tia had taken a hot dipping sauce out from her backpack. This she dipped her fish into before tasting it. Hazel also noticed this and teased, "You do know that Harry made some tartar sauce, right? and that Tartar sauce will go a lot better with fish than hot sauce?"

Tia shook her head, biting down on the piece of fish she had dipped into the sauce, smiling slightly at the taste. "It's better when it's hotter."

"Give over, Mom. Why do you think my last birthday present to her was a set of different hot sauces?" Harry asked, poking his sister in the shoulder.

She looked over at him and gave Harry one of those smiles of hers that completely warmed his heart, despite how small they seemed to other people. "That was a good one.

Going to be hard for me to top it.”

Tia’s present to Harry had been a book on Hunter-specific tactics and strategies against different Grimm. But, Guld had downplayed the gift the moment he saw it, saying it was written by someone who had never actually been a Hunter himself. “Most books like that are. You get more out of listening to old Hunters or going to one of the fancy Academies that are around these days. The funny thing is, that kind of thing was only just starting up when I was born. But now, it’s hard to find a Hunter that wasn’t trained at one of the four Academies. How times change.”

Tia had been quite annoyed at that. But Harry had told her that it was the thought that counted.

The four of them settled down to eat, and then Tia and Harry retired for the night, the two adults taking it upon themselves to be on watch in turns. Hazel stayed with the RV the next day while Guld took Tia and Harry up through the mountains following the stream.

They moved quietly, none of them talking, and whenever Harry or Tia tried, Guld turned on them, holding up a finger to his lips. This was Grimm country, after all. Thankfully both kids were smart and realized this was not the time to joke around quickly.

About an hour after they left the base camp, Guld’s caution proved warranted. He held up a hand, gesturing both of his kids back and to the right with a few hand gestures that he had spent that morning drilling them in. Both of them obeyed instantly, hiding in among the bushes as Guld slowly backed away, almost slithering on the ground until he was likewise hidden, then making his way back to them in a similar manner.

When he joined them, Guld leaned close so that both twins could feel his beard touching their cheeks. “Watch the river,” he whispered, so low they had to strain to hear him.

Guld had noticed a new trail heading down to the river marked by recent paw prints. Like a group of animals had begun to make their way to the river in that manner and had done so over several days.

A moment later, a giant bear-like **thing** trundled down the path, heading towards the water. It was massive, the size of a grizzly or even larger, but it had skin instead of fur, black oily skin, and on its face was a large bone-white mask, matching a white spine-like protrusion from its back. The thing had white claws, and portions of its chest were similarly covered in bone-like armor. And the thing’s eyes were an almost searing red color, gleaming with malevolence as it leaned down and began to lap at the stream.

“No one knows where the Grimm originally came from. Or if someone does, they certainly aren’t sharing it with the masses,” Guld whispered, keeping his voice low as still more giant bear-like things moved down the path joining the first. Besides lapping at the water, the

creatures didn't do anything else that a group of bears would have. They didn't try to fight for dominance, they didn't bump against one another, and while the creatures made noises, they didn't sound quite right to Harry's ears.

"What is known is that the Grimm are made to resemble creatures. Often, they act like those creatures do in the wild. To a certain degree anyway. But as you can see, all Grimm, no matter their shape, have a certain pack mentality."

Harry and Tia both nodded silently, saying nothing, not trusting their ability to speak low enough that the nearby Grimm couldn't hear them. They both simply observed, lost in their own thoughts at this first sight of the great enemy of mankind.

To Harry's eyes, the Grimm was certainly not natural. They might almost appear like animals, but something inside him warned that they were anything but. The Grimm did not belong here. And looking at them, Harry could well understand why people were so scared of them at first sight. *It's almost like someone took a child's idea of what a scary animal looks like and used that to conjure the Grimm into being. That's disturbing.*

But Harry had faced death eaters at their worst, giants, acromantula and Dementors, as well as a previously immortal dark Lord. These creatures held no fear to him. He was wary of them but not afraid.

Likewise, in Tia's case, she was not afraid. She didn't have another lifetime's experience to draw upon, but she was an abnormally brave girl regardless. She just stared at the Grimm calculatingly, wondering where its weak points were, how best to fight it, what would a Grimm like that act like and so forth.

Seeing both of the twins' non-reaction to the Grimm, Guld sighed, feeling both pride and a serious amount of sadness as he read what he could from their expressions. Despite his family's 'proud history of being Hunters, if Arturia had been the only one of his children to take up the mantle of a Hunter, Guld would've been very happy indeed. He **hated** that the family legacy meant so many of his family had put themselves in harm's way.

I never really understood the sadness I saw in Dad's face when he began to train my brothers and me, but now I understand. It was a very hard thing to put your own children in harm's way like this. Maybe that's why people like Glynda and Ironwood, Ozpin and Leo don't have children of their own. They can't deal with the idea of doing this.

But not only was it a family tradition, but frankly, like Arturia before them, both Harry and Tia had taken to the training like a pair of ducks to water. Neither of them was far enough along to have developed a personal style, but their bodies certainly showed the training, and neither of them had **ever** shown any fear of hard work or even pain. Indeed, both of them had normal childhood incidents, skinned knees, bruises.

Harry had even broken his arm once, although it hadn't been his fault, rather Rouge's for thinking she could climb up that high without incident. Harry hadn't even cried out as he went to find Violet still holding Rouge in his unbroken arm and had been much more concerned about the little girl than his own broken arm, although it had been purpling and swelling at the time. The same went for Arturia, who had broken both legs just a few months before having her Aura unlocked. They weren't fearless, but all three kids were unwilling to let fear or pain beat them

The three of them stayed there as Guld explained about the various Grimm in the area and how Grimm were rated regarding the danger they posed. Both children had learned some of this already but seeing the Grimm in front of them like this made it much more real.

Then, as the Ursa made to cross the river, Guld led the twins away, skirting around the river for a time to the east before swinging back toward the river. As they went, Guld scanned everywhere at once, whispering to the two now silent teens to do the same, telling them what to look out for, what signs to look for to know Grimm was about and what kind. Again, the twins had heard some of this before, but learning like this made it sink in quickly.

Twice more, they had to pause to allow Grimm to cross the river, both times the Grimm in question being the ubiquitous Creepers, who could apparently be found on every continent in varying numbers. These were strange bipeds, with no arms to speak of, but large legs and a forward-thrusting mouth that put Harry in mind of a very warped version of a dinosaur. They weren't as much trouble as the bear-like Ursa, neither strong nor durable. They were, however, very numerous.

At around midday, the trio of Arcs came upon the Arc Butte. Contrary to any speculation the twins had made (which they had incessantly that morning and the night before), this was simply a massive piece of granite. It was about three yards wide and twice that tall and was stuck in the middle of the river right in front of the bottom of a waterfall. The waterfall was at least eight stories tall, although the river was not wide or strong enough for the water to splash much.

"In the past, the rock was set into the waterfall, which eroded it nearly flat on the outer side. Don't ask me why, the reason's been lost to time, but sometime in the ancient past, some Arc pulled the thing out and then set it in the center of the river, flat side facing downstream," Guld explained as he gestured the twins into the water.

It was cold, but only about as deep as their waists, so both could wade easily. From there, they could stare straight up at the flat side of the stone and the names there.

Names had been carved into the stone, the writing about as large as Harry's pinky. Dozens of names, maybe as many as a hundred, Harry couldn't quite tell, as they started at the very top of the stone and moved their way down. And many of the names were crossed out. **Many** of them. It didn't take a genius to understand what that meant.

Guld gestured at the names, ordering his twins to read them to themselves as he spoke, his voice gruff, strained with both grief and fear. Fear for the twins, Harry realized with a start. *He doesn't want us out there, but he doesn't want to stop us from chasing our dreams either. Damn... talk about being caught between a rock and a hard place.*

"Here are the names of the Arcs who have gone before. Every Arc who took up the job of fighting the Grimm is here, going back far longer than it had been called Hunting. Can either of you tell me why an entire family would continue to dedicate some of our kin to defending humanity after so many generations?"

"After so many dead," Harry murmured, staring up at the stone, trying to make out the names that had been crossed out.

"It is a sacrifice," Tia said simply, not looking away from the stone, continuing to read the names above them. as Harry was doing. "We sacrifice our lives. We put ourselves in danger so that others may not have to."

"Yes," Guld said, while inside, he wanted to weep. While this was where Violet had stumbled and decided she didn't have it in her to be a hunter, that was almost word for word what Arturia had said before. *These two will make great Hunters. I just wish they will also have long and happy lives to go with it.*

"Tia's right. We put ourselves, no, we make ourselves as shields for humanity, to keep the dark things at bay." Harry reached up to run his fingers through a name on the list above them, a name that had been crossed out recently. "And we hope that when we die, our example remains, to shine through the generations."

That was an awfully mature outlook, Guld reflected. The fact that becoming a Hunter was a sacrifice was something he had anticipated from Tia. She wasn't Magenta who read anything she could get her hands on, but Tia had shown a marked interest in the more serious type of fantasy. The kind where a sacrifice was often necessary and just as often lauded.

Harry's take was a bit more surprising. *Although perhaps I shouldn't be. Of all my children, even Arturia, Harry's shown the most leadership abilities. He knows about setting an example.*

"Right. We are Arcs. We care not for fame. Let others take the accolades. We care not for money," Guld nearly spat the word. "Our treasure has always been our family. We care about the duty, about the job ahead of us. Let others call us heroes, let others call us foolish or worse. We know our duty, and that is all."

Both of the kids nodded, and Guld slowly moved into the water behind them, smiling wryly as he remembered his dad mentioning that this part was almost like a baptism in some old religion that his own grandfather had mentioned a time or two. Guld wasn't religious. He'd

seen far too much of the world to believe that there was some over-arching power out there controlling everything.

“Then prepare yourselves.” Guld laid a gentle hand on either of their heads without another word. He wondered briefly if he should do this one at a time but then decided against it. *I brought them here together, I will unlock their Auras at the same time. It seems fitting.* With that thought, he began.

“For it is with determination that we uphold our duty. Through this, we become shields of humanity, like the Knights of old, defending those weaker than ourselves against the dark. Infinite in potential, unbound by fear, I do release thy souls and call thee to service.”

For a moment, nothing happened, then Guld felt his own Aura pulse out and into his twins. But instead of Awakening the spark of Aura within them, like a strong wind on embers, the wind bounced back into Guld as if he had run into a wall.

To Harry and Tia, it felt as if their souls were bells which had just been struck by something. But instead of ringing on, reacting to the words, only a few of them seemed to resonate. Not enough to cause their Aura’s to awaken.

The idea that he had failed to unlock his children’s Aura had barely a second to percolate through Guld’s mind before he found the amount of Aura he’d been pouring into them flashing back into himself. The rebounded impact sent Guld stumbling backward, splashing through the water. Then his eyes rolled back in his head as he collapsed.

At the splash, the twins turned around, having felt something when Guld’s Aura attempted to connect to their own, but not having any experience to know what they had felt. Now seeing their dad insensate, Harry grabbed the large man’s arms, hauling his upper body back up above the water, as Tia moved to grab him by the shoulder. “Let’s get him out of the water.”

Tia nodded, and the two of them wrestled Guld out onto the grass beside the river bed, then leaned down, tapping his throat, shaking her head once. “Unconscious.” She looked over at her brother, her lips quirking wryly, and was for once thankful she didn’t feel emotions as strongly as others did. *If I did, I think I would be panicking right now.* “I don’t think that was supposed to happen, do you?”

“I rather doubt it,” Harry answered just as wryly, although internally, he was very annoyed. *Why the hell do I think that this has something to do with me? Because getting my magic back couldn’t be that simple. Dammit, Death might have said I was free of the fates, but I still think I’m Fate’s choir boy!*

Looking up at the sky, Harry estimated it was pushing past midday. By the time their mom could get up here, it would be nighttime, and that wasn’t a good time to be out and about in Grimm country. *Not with only one of us able to fight, really.* He pulled out his scroll and tried

to call their mom, finding that it was out of range, of course. Mistral didn't have as good scroll coverage as Atlas and Vale were supposed to, so that didn't honestly surprise Harry. But what it meant for them was not pleasant to contemplate. "We're going to have to at least start back towards mom and the base camp."

Tia nodded, and the two of them rolled Guld onto his back and pulled out his glaive, which Tia used to cut a few branches. Harry pulled off the old man's jacket, using it and his own to create a kind of stretcher. It creaked, but it would help them move him along.

Traveling with their unconscious dad, who out-massed them by at least one and a half times, was not pleasant for either twin. Worse, there were still Grimm about.

As they were moving through the forest near the river, having just skirted back to it, there was a roar to one side. "RORORORAAARRR!"

Both children turned, dumping Guld onto the ground and staring as a single Ursa charged out of the woods towards them. While they were attracted to fear and hate like a shark to blood, a Grimm would always attack a human if they spotted them regardless of the human's emotions.

Thinking quickly, Tia charged forward', dodging to one side and below a blow from the giant creature, then kicking its leg.

Of course, the blow didn't do anything. As strong as Tia was for her size, Tia didn't even come up to the giant beast's knee. But it kept the creature's attention fully on her. "Harry! The rifle!"

Guld's weapon was what was called a mecha-shift weapon. It could transform from one close-range weapon to one long-range weapon, in this case, a glaive, and what Guld had described as an elephant gun, a gun that fired slowly but had large caliber bullets. Harry had seen Guld change the weapon several times and performed the action quickly, then set the rifle against his shoulder, sighting down range as they'd been taught. *Oh, I hope this works!* "Over here, ugly!"

The words didn't do anything at first, but Tia, who had just barely dodged a blow, flung herself backward through a series of bushes. With the little nuisance right in front of it gone, the bear finally turned its attention back to him and took a shot to the chest. The bullet was large enough to down the Ursa, punching straight through its chest above its bone armor, causing it to howl in agony.

Harry had a moment of elation and to think *Huh, you really should aim high, I was aiming for his headDDD!* Before he stumbled, hissing in pain. While Harry was well built and quite strong for his age, looking more like Oliver Wood had than scrawny Harry back in his old life, but even so, the kick of the large rifle was something else.

He stumbled, going to one knee, but then his eyes widened as another Ursa came barreling out of the woods, chasing Tia from her hiding place.

Pushing himself to his feet, Harry charged forward, waving his arm and bellowing, causing the Ursa to pause and look at him. Thinking quickly, Harry then skidded to a stop before hurling the rifle along the ground towards Tia to one side of the Grimm.

As the Grimm charged past her, not recognizing the weapon as a danger, Tia grabbed it up, shifted it back into glaive form, and lashed upward. The cutting edge of the glaive sliced into the Ursa right underneath its forearm's armpit, cutting deep. It roared and turned, but Tia, using the weapon's weight, performed a full circle as she dodged away. When the Ursa lunged at her, it had to pause for just a second as a glob of dirt hit it right in the eyes, hurled by Harry.

Before it could do anything else, the glaive's cutting edge found its throat, and the Grimm fell, dead. There, it quickly began to decompose, turning into specks of black that dissipated in the air. The first one had already done so.

And people see that happen and still think there's something natural about these things!? When we get back to civilization, I'm going to need to look into the origins of Grimm. There's got to have been some kind of scientific study done about them.

"Good thinking," Tia approved as she moved back towards Harry. "It is kind of strange how they decompose so quickly, isn't it? I have to wonder why. It is as if the world itself rejects them, or they reject it."

Harry blinked, only now realizing that he had spoken aloud earlier rather than keeping his monologue to himself. "Er, glad I'm not the only one who thinks so," he covered quickly, then gestured down to their dad. "Come on, let's get a move on. Hopefully, that thing won't have any friends."

Her eyes slightly widening at the idea, Tia hurried forward, strapping the glaive across her shoulders lengthwise, then grabbing the back of the makeshift stretcher while Harry took the lead.

Unfortunately, the sound of the fight had alerted the Grimm around them, and they had an even harder time moving forward. They were able to hide and sneak their way back until a Creeper literally came out of the scrub around them and walked right into Tia. Harry was quick to kill it with a thrust from the glaive, but there were others, and Harry had to think fast even as he shot the first two Creepers to come at them. "The trees! Get into the trees!"

Nodding. Tia climbed up into a tree, then flung herself out and around, using just her legs to hang for a moment. Thankfully her shirt was a tight exercise shirt, so she could still see, and Harry handed her up one of Guld's arms, then scrambled up the tree himself, hampered by the glaive. *I really wish I had some magic right now! Even first-year spells would do. I'm not fussy!*

Once he joined his sister on the large branch, Harry used the edge of the glaive to hook Guld's armor. "HEAVE!"

As one, the twins tried to pull Guld, a large, heavy man up into the air. Muscles strained, and Tia and Harry both felt something in their arms starting to go, but they somehow got Guld up far enough for Harry to switch his grip to his dad's arm, dropping the glaive so that it got caught in a few smaller branches. Just as a Creeper leaped up to bite the man.

Breathing hard, the two barely-teens tugged their dad over to where Harry could stuff him between two branches. "All in favor of the old man going on a diet, say aye!"

"Aye!" Tia grunted, picking up the glaive and shifting it into rifle mode. "How bad is the kick on this?"

"Bad. Lean against me. I'll hold onto a few branches above us," Harry answered.

Tia nodded and instantly began to fire at the Creepers below.

Luckily for the twins, they had gotten close enough that the shots were heard by Hazel back at the camp.

Minutes later, just as Tia said, "I think we're almost out of bullets..." their mother came out of the woods. In Hazel's hands, her hatchet pistols barked, gunning Grimm down, before she charged forward, the pistols shifting into twin hatchets which she used to hack and slice five more Grimm into pieces. Her Semblance, Mad Blow, tripled any attack she made, allowing her to make quick work of large Grimm and crowds of smaller ones.

"Harry, Tia, are you both alright!? Where is your dad, why did he..." Hazel's voice trailed off as she came close enough to see past the twins to where they had stuffed their unconscious but seemingly uninjured dad. "Right, let's get all three of you back to the RV and into the air before explanations."

True to her word, Hazel didn't ask any questions until they'd gotten back to the campsite. There, she put her husband into one of the back seats, and she and the twins went around the campsite, loading everything back into the RV and quickly getting into the air. While Hazel had wiped out all the Grimm between the campsite and where Harry and the others hiding, the amount of violence would no doubt bring other Grimm to investigate and getting back to the campsite had taken too long as it was, so getting into the air where they would see aerial Grimm coming was the best plan.

The moment they were in the air, Hazel looked up into the rear-view mirror, an affectation that her husband had put in, but Hazel was now very thankful for. "Now, what happened?"

Astonishment was the night's theme as they returned to the estate, and Arturia and the others all learned what had happened. Arturia instantly tried to awaken Tia on her own.

“Everyone knows that it takes a lot of Aura to awaken someone else’s, the more Aura that individual has, the more you have to use to wake it up. Father was just being a fool for attempting to awaken both of their Auras at once.”

Using the same words as Guld had, Arturia tried to awaken Tia’s Aura, but again, nothing happened. There was no blinding light from her, no sign of awakening. As she stumbled away, Arturia described it as if, “I was trying to smash open a steel door without the key. I, I think I could feel her Aura within, but I was not able to kindle it.”

Hazel tried, and then several of their uncles tried, but it didn’t work. Finally, Samson, Guld’s oldest brother, spoke up. He was the chief Doctor of the town, not just the family, and had served in that capacity for as long as Harry could remember. Unlike Paul, Samson had quit being a Hunter quickly. Harry had asked Guld why and had learned that Samson’s entire Hunter team had been wiped out save for Samson on a mission, and he just hadn’t been willing to work with anyone else and hadn’t been skilled enough to work freelance on his own.

“I think we are running into the issue here that occasionally, Auras are known to need specific words or phrases to be unlocked. The words must match the individual’s soul unless you can overpower the individual’s Aura. You can’t use any old words if you’re not strong enough. They have to be specific.”

“Those words have always worked in our family!” Stacy Arc was another aunt and one who none of the kids got along with, a spinster with a snappy attitude and bitter world outlook who was something of a family recluse, or as much as she could be while still living in Evig Låga. Harry had no idea why she was there at all, but now she actually glared at the twosome, as if this was all their fault, concentrating particularly on Harry. “Maybe they’re just not...”

But the recovered Guld harrumphed and glared at his sister, who subsided with ill grace.

“Perhaps they have. Or perhaps when it hasn’t, it just hasn’t been recorded. Regardless, I believe that our attempts to brute force the twin’s awakening aren’t going to work.” Samson smirked at that, looking at the two twins. “Arturia alone was almost the equal of Guld when she had her Aura unlocked. It looks as if these two are of the same mold, only perhaps with a greater amount of Aura.”

“Great, just great,” Harry groaned, thumping his head back against the chair that he was sitting in with Tia. *Why can’t it ever be simple with me? And now I’m screwing up Tia’s chances too! That’s not fair!*

While Harry was having a minor existential crisis, Tia simply took things as they came and lifted one finger up to tap her lips thoughtfully. “What will happen now?”

“We will keep training you never fear,” Hazel said before anyone else could say anything. “I doubt this is enough to stop either of you from wanting to be Hunters, and just because the fancy pants method that the Arcs use to unlock their Auras didn’t work with you

two doesn't mean that you won't be able to figure out how to unlock it yourselves in the future."

Her husband winced but nodded. For now, that was fine, but in the future, who knew? *Maybe this is Fate's way of saying these two shouldn't be Hunters? I, I think I would like that. Having Arturia so ready to leap into danger is hard enough, to say nothing of what happened today and their needing to defend me like that!*

Hazel didn't mention that she was kind of worried about attempting to unlock either twin's reserves with the words that had unlocked her Aura more than two decades ago. She was no Arc, and if the words failed? Well, her husband had been out for six hours, and his Aura reserves were far larger than Hazel's. She was really worried about how bad it would affect her.

Both Harry and Tia breathe sighs of relief at their parent's support, and Arturia chuckled. "Well, I will continue to support the two of you in your career going forward, of course. Never fear. And, maybe we could look on this as a positive. After all, once they get Aura, a lot of people tend to kite along instead of pushing themselves."

"I think you meant skate along, dear, but you're right in any event. Now knowing that your Aura will heal your bruises or that any cut or slash can actually hurt you will make you take the training all the more seriously."

As Arturia nodded sagely at that, Hazel loomed over her twins, looking down them and fighting the urge to cackle evilly. "In fact, I think, starting tomorrow, I will start to take part in fear training too. Look forward to it, kids."

The smile she was wearing did not make Harry happier about the current situation. But there was scant little he could do about it except curse lady luck and fates to the nth degree.

Harry ignored the looks that he and Tia were getting with the ease of long practice in his past life. Instead of being put off or becoming self-conscious, he just ignored it, although he was somewhat amused to note that Tia was also ignoring them. *I wonder if she notices them and doesn't care, or just doesn't notice in the first place? With Tia, that's a poser.*

It was the first day of school at Lighthouse High, the equivalent in this universe of vocational middle school and high school combined. And the two of them were walking beside their sister Arturia, who had time on the flight here to make herself look not so zombie-like as she normally did in the morning.

While Evig Låga had enough kids to have their own elementary school, they didn't have enough Hunters to have their own Hunter's school, and the necessary electronics and so forth for one was so extreme that prospective Hunters really did need a faculty devoted to that career.

For the last three years, Arturia had been going to this school, which serviced several other smaller communities around the edge of the Anima continent. According to his parents, it

was somewhat known as a bit of a hick school to those in Mistral proper. But because all of the kids there were in the same boat, there wasn't any factionalism or discrimination.

Looking around, Harry felt that perhaps his parents had not been as accurate as normal on that score. He could see a few Faunus students, with Tia looking towards one of them in particular. He was a mouse, a literal mousy little boy, who, like his fellow Faunus were being surreptitiously glared at by several kids their age as they all moved into the school grounds in a rush.

Arturia's voice brought Harry's attention back to her. She stood in the school uniform, the same as them, but unlike Harry and Tia, she made it look good. The skirt came up only to around her knees, the blouse straining at her chest in such a way that it would probably shut down most young men's minds. Arturia had her shoulders back, her golden eyes narrowed, and not a hint of a smile on her face. They were in public now, and when in public, Arturia routinely retreated behind what Harry had called her regal mask since he was seven or so.

"I will see the two of you for lunch, shall I," She asked, although her tone made the question into a statement.

Harry nodded, patting the backpack he was carrying. "I have enough lunch for all three of us, so long as you don't go full lioness on us."

Arturia huffed, then nodded, and only Harry noticed the amused twitch of her lips at that as well as a slight pink hue on her cheeks for just a second, and he knew that he would pay for that later. But he didn't regret it. It was true, after all. While the other's appetites seemed to have diminished with age, Arturia still ate like a madwoman. *And her habit of nomming on my head when we sleep in the same bed hasn't gone away either.*

Whispers followed Harry and Tia as they entered the school. Harry had gotten out of the habit of ignoring them in this life and couldn't help but listen to a few of them. But he was amused to note they were almost all about their connection to Arturia rather than that they too were Arcs. That was good in a way, although the rumors were kind of hilarious to listen to.

"Oh my God, they were hanging out with her, the Queen!"

"She was actually nice to them, did you notice!? I didn't think the Ice Queen could be nice to anyone!"

"While the Queen and the girl look a bit alike, so maybe they are siblings? You have to think that if she had a soft spot for anyone, it'd be family, maybe..."

And so forth and so on. Until the twins got through the line of new freshmen and to the desk of the registrar's office, all the talk in the crowd of kids was about Arturia and the twin's connection to her. *I knew she was popular, but this is ridiculous. Has she always been this famous here, or is it because she's in the Mistral Tournament this year?*

They were waved to one of the women manning the desk and moved forward as one, causing the woman to frown, but then she shrugged. "Names?"

"Tia and Hadrian Arc, although I go by Harry."

The woman nodded and ticked the names off. She then read through a little note on the side, frowning slightly. "It says here you two haven't awakened your Aura yet, correct?"

Both of them nodded, and she pulled out a notebook, then gestured them one after another into a photobooth set to one side of her desk. "You're not alone, so don't worry, many new students haven't managed that just yet, so you'll be taking meditation and a few more courses, although I also note here that neither of you is willing to join the blacksmith classes?"

Harry shook his head, as did Tia. Although Harry was somewhat amused internally at the name. Calling it a blacksmith class was a bit of a misnomer, in his opinion. Part of it was blacksmithing, sure. But in those classes, the students also learned how to make their own weapons, be it regular weapons or mecha-shifting weapons.

"And you're both sword users?"

Harry nodded, while Tia clarified, "I use a double-handed Claymore. Harry uses a longsword and a shield combination."

The woman wrote all that down, smiled at them politely, and then gave them directions to the other homeroom. Once more, Harry became amused as the two of them silenced everyone as they entered, and a whisper of "That's them, the Queen's siblings" and more began as they moved to their assigned chairs. But here, those calls were followed by the inevitable, "They don't look so tough to me."

Hehehe, crud, but all this teenage drama stuff really is kind of funny if you honestly can't care less about it, huh? After his past life, Harry had zero interest in caring about what people thought of him beyond his immediate family. And any friends he made outside it, but Harry wasn't going to go looking.

He shared a glance with Tia, who seemed interested in the mutters of people who felt they could take the two of them or, in the case of one wag, said, "I bet they're here just because of their family name, or Queen Arturia vouching for them. First combat class, they'll fold, I guarantee it."

"Down, girl," Harry warned, reaching out to poke Tia's shoulder. "Wait for combat class." Another thing his twin and Arturia had in common was they both loved challenges, the more physical, the better.

Tia looked at him, then shrugged and leaned back, waiting for class to start.

The day passed uneventfully at first. Their homeroom teacher was a nice middle-aged man with a large paunch and a jolly laugh, which somewhat reminded Harry of a strange mix between Arturia Weasley and his father. He taught math and language arts in the morning.

Thank goodness we were homeschooled so much. I'd have been lost otherwise, past life or no past life. Well, at least in math. Harry had never taken any math classes in Hogwarts, and his one attempt to return to the nonmagical world to get away from his fame fell through for too many reasons to count. But one of them was the fact he'd have to go back and start taking classes as a sixth-grader. Which would, have put him a few years behind the classes here, at best.

Thankfully, the same was not true of his writing skills. His work on essays in his last life continued to serve him well here. And as he felt Tia's eyes on him, Harry knew she would need his help. Harry smiled at her when they left to head to their next class. "You help me with any fantasy-based stuff, and I'll help you with the essays, as usual."

"Mmm." Tia smiled, linking arms with her twin and leading the way to a class they both usually enjoyed at home. Thankfully this proved to also be the case here, although Harry was a bit bemused by how the teacher not only spoke about important events, but tournament matches and important champions as if they were one and the same.

However, some problems began to rear their heads at lunchtime. Although the problem wasn't aimed directly towards Harry and Tia.

As they were moving through the crowd heading towards a pair of chairs rather than joining the line for what Arturia had once pronounced 'as lunch by the lowest bidder', both twins stopped, staring at one corner of the cafeteria, where a group of Faunus freshmen was sitting in one defensive group. Whether they started like that or not, they were currently being crowded in by a large group of freshmen and sophomores. One of them, a large, somewhat beefy fresh-girl, was growling out, "We don't want your kind here!"

"Yeah, go back to your island, freaks!"

"I don't know why people think that you Faunus deserve to become Hunters at all. With what the White Fang is doing, you all have more in common with Grimm than humans!"

Harry and Tia exchanged a single glance, then Harry delicately set his backpack down and followed Tia as she surged forward. The crowd gave way before her, those who didn't get out of her way being politely but inexorably moved as the deceptively strong Tia shifted them this way and that.

Coming up behind the crowd of bullies, Tia reached forward, grabbing the young man who had just spoken by the back of his throat, lifting him a foot in the air before tossing him aside as if he was so much trash.

He tumbled into several others, including the girl who seemed to be their leader, and Harry put his fingers in his mouth, letting loose a shrill whistle. Everyone stopped what they were doing as the group on the ground began to try to step up, only to find Tia looming over them. "I thought that this was a school for Hunters, not bullies. Anyone here has a right to be here because they decided to put their lives on the line for everyone else in the world. It doesn't matter where they come from. It doesn't matter what they look like or what race they are."

"And if you have a problem with that, we'll fight you," Tia added bluntly. "There is no place here for racism, just like there is no place for it out in the field."

"What she said," Harry agreed, flicking a finger towards his twin. "I'm sure our parents would understand and cheerfully continue our training at home."

The freshmen around them backed off, glaring heatedly at the two of them but not so dedicated to bullying the Faunus that they would continue a physical altercation here in the cafeteria on their first day. However, a few of the second-year students glared, cracking their knuckles and moving towards the twins. "I see you two need to be taught a little bit about the pecking order around here," one of them, a young man, growled.

"I rather think that they understand perfectly well what the pecking order around here is," A cold, icy voice announced, and everyone there froze, turning slowly towards its source.

Arturia had entered the cafeteria along with much of the senior class when the confrontation began, and now she and several others were moving towards the group. The sophomores all backed up quickly, looking shamefaced, and the single fresh-girl who had begun all this gulped, suddenly finding herself very much alone as the Ice Queen of the school boar down on her.

"I believe," Arturia said in her cold, aloof voice, "That I had made my stance on bullying Faunus or any other foolish activity very plain within my first week as a freshman. Did I not, Constance?"

A badger Faunus nearby grinned cheerfully, showing wide flat teeth that were still quite threatening despite looking mostly human. "You did, Your Majesty," she said, without any hint of droll humor in her tone as she used the term. In Lighthouse, Arturia truly was the Queen. "The whole school's known about it."

"I thought as much." She looked down at the freshman woman, whose name was Mary Bell, cocking her head to one side. "Unless, of course, you wish to make a point of it? The teachers prefer us to solve our own issues, and I will cheerfully take on any comers who have an issue with my authority to make a decree on such matters."

Mary Bell gaped, her mouth opening and closing for a few seconds before she rapidly shook her head, looking away.

At this Arturia nodded. "Very good. And I should also note that anyone who wishes to make trouble for my little brother and little sister had best decide to think again. It would go very poorly for them."

Arturia allowed a smile to crack her face for a moment. "If only because both of my siblings are fully capable of looking after themselves even without Aura."

That caused a stir throughout the cafeteria among the populace. With that accomplished, Arturia to turn to Harry, who smirked, pulling out a homemade lunch for her. "You're just tribute, my lady."

She nodded, taking it as if she were a queen and the boxed lunch a proper offering. "My thanks, good sir," she said with a smile and a nod before sitting down and gesturing the other students around her, her court, to do so.

All of them nodded and sat down, instantly beginning to talk, while Constance gestured to the younger Faunus to do the same. Harry and Tia both found themselves surrounded by new acquaintances. Harry talked to them quietly while Tia sat, eating her food and interjecting here and there but letting her twin do most of the talking as always.

By the time a month had passed, Harry and Tia had found themselves in the odd position of being among the leaders of the freshman class, despite their lack of Aura. Unfortunately, Mary Bell, for all of her racist tendencies, was one of the other leaders. First of all, her family was quite well known in the area. Not rich per se, and not as well known in Hunter circles as the Arcs, but still a big fish in a small pond. This allowed Mary Bell to get away with some things so long as she wasn't outright called on them like Harry, and Tia did.

Still, they could curb her actions easily enough outside of combat training. There, Mary Bell's sheer skill and abilities actually allowed her to get away with quite a bit more. By the end of those two weeks, it was clear that she was almost to a sophomore-level already, just like the Arc twins, even though neither of them had Aura and she did. Their skill level was just that good for their age group.

As Harry put it one night, while he was dutifully combing Arturia's hair, "We've learned how to dodge, and we'll still have. You people with your Aura and everything tend to think that dodging is for sissies, which is hilarious."

"I believe you cleaned that up quite well," Arturia drawled, her tone somewhat tart, even as she turned into a puddle underneath Harry's hands. "Mmmm...how are you so good at this?"

"How many years have I been doing this for you and the others?" Harry quipped.

"Heh, true. Remind me to get Violet and Saffron fruit baskets. They did something immensely good for all womankind when they first put a comb in your hands." Arturia

murmured, leaning against her younger brother's shoulder, not noticing how much this pushed her chest against Harry's upper body.

Harry did notice this and flushed blushed slightly. While Tia was his own age, 13, and just barely starting to show curves, Arturia was 18. This meant she was a fully-fledged woman. Arturia wasn't as big up top as their mother was, or even Violet, but Arturia already matched Saffron in that area, had legs that wouldn't quit, and a face that had... well, in the past month, Harry had seen Arturia drive boys to distraction, despite her cold, aloof attitude. *Heh, I wonder what they would do if they knew she could turn into such a cuddly kitten if pampered the right way?*

That thought was way better than Harry's own appreciation of Arturia's beauty, and he decided to follow it with what he thought was a natural progression. "By the way, what should I do with those love letters I've been getting?"

"What!?" squawked several voices, and Harry realized he'd made a mistake. As Mount Arturia began to gather energy and Tia sat up abruptly from where she had been doing homework beside Maggie, Harry quickly corrected himself. "They're not for me! They're boys in the sophomore and senior class, who want me to pass them on to you, Arturia."

"Oh." Arturia subsided while every other female there breathed sighs of relief. This included Violet and Hazel, who had been going over the small bit of homework Rose and Rouge had been given that day. All of them shared the thought that their Harry was far too young for that kind of nonsense!

"Just burn them," Arturia answered bluntly.

"Mm. I've always thought love letters were dumb. If you love someone, shouldn't you have the courage to tell them that to their face," Tia opined. "I've not even read any of the letters I've found in my locker."

Calling on all his past life's limited maturity, Harry pushed back an urge to find out who was flirting with his twin and commit violence upon them, shaking his head. "I really don't think I want that on my social conscience."

"Meh. Give the letters to me. I'll do it," Tia said, holding up her hand. "You can just say that you asked me for advice on what to do for them, and I'll keep burning them."

"Even when they start giving me ones for you?"

"Especially if they keep giving them ones for me. I have no interest in love letters. I've made that plain. If they are stupid enough to try to get you to give them to me after the past month, there is no hope for them," Tia answered, shrugging her shoulders and showing no more interest in the topic than if someone had pointed out a plank of wood with an interesting design on it.

“That works,” Harry laughed and pulled moved away from Arturia, looking around for the next one. “Rouge, I think Mom said you scored best in your homework?”

Standing up, Hazel nodded, carefully hiding a grin. It had been her idea to use Harry’s ability with the hairbrush as a bribe for the rest of the kids, pairing the order to how well they did in their homework. It had worked incredibly well. *Who knew that just being first or whatever would be such a huge draw when Harry is more than willing to do it for all of them?*

Harry and Tia’s status as trainees who didn’t have Aura didn’t particularly matter for that first year. Most of the freshman class didn’t have it after all, although that slowly started to change as the year went on. They still retained positions near the top of their class but were slowly losing ground as their fellows gained access to their Aura and began to simply out-endurance the two twins in training.

But even then, they could still win most of their actual spars. Harry was fast, and his reaction speed was able to make a snake Faunus blink, and he and Tia also continued their training under their parents at home whenever they were home. And Tia had begun to develop into a true strength-based monster. Indeed, many of the other freshmen came to believe that she already had Aura because of how strong she was, despite not being as massively muscled or as powerfully built as their dad and Violet.

She didn’t, though. Tia couldn’t take injuries any more than Harry could. But if their opponents let her hit them, Aura or no, they felt it.

Regardless of their position in their grade's social and educational hierarchy, the twins were torn between enjoying their time at school and not enjoying it. The social scene didn’t interest either of them, and both of them, if for very different reasons, didn’t care about the gossip, the rumor mill, or anything else that so excited the rest of their classmates and the other upper years. To them, all of that was useless. They were in school to train to be Hunters. That was it. Friends were fine, but both had high standards for that kind of thing.

Their classes were also only okay. While he appreciated learning to a certain degree, Harry had gone through high school once already, and his patience for anything, scholastic or social was threadbare at best. As for Tia, her patience for anything not directly involved with Hunting was not the best.

Arturia was also not around nearly as often as in years past, something that caused both Harry and Tia some grief, but neither commented on it, as they had been warned well ahead of time that she would be joining the Mistral Tournament scene. The Mistral Tournament was a year-long series of one-on-one gladiatorial matches televised around Anima. It was a **major** national pastime, and nearly everyone in Mistral or the dozens of smaller communities around the edge of the larger nation watched it.

Those who did well became celebrities like movie stars. Champions were even more lauded. But none of that could matter to Arturia, and Harry knew it.

When Harry asked her why she wanted to join the tournament circuit, Arturia shrugged, her lips twitching. "Two reasons. One, I need a challenge. Not even Constance can truly make me sweat for a victory at this point. And the last time Mother and I fought..."

"Enough said," Tia answered for the younger kids, actually chuckling. Hazel and Arturia had utterly demolished the training dojo. So much so, the building needed to be rebuilt entirely. Guld had been furious with both of them, and for the first time ever, the kids had seen their mom on the receiving end of a dressing down. She hadn't taken it any better than Arturia, both of them sulking the night away.

"Exactly." Arturia coughed and tried to regain some poise. "Ahem, so it is obvious I cannot fight our parents for reasons of familial peace if nothing else. But the Tournament can let me fight other young firebrands such as myself, older, experienced Hunters and full-time gladiators. It is easily the best decision for me. I might even continue it if I can from Beacon."

"You've decided on Beacon then?" Harry asked, somewhat surprised. "I thought you would go to Haven." Haven Academy was Mistral's hunter college.

"I had thought that too. But as you know, I stayed late at school last night. That wasn't only because I submitted my name to the Tournament organizers, but because Headmaster Leo came by. He had apparently heard of me. The man is..." Arturia thought about it for a moment. "He seems pleasant enough but was too interested in getting me to come there. And I had previously met Professor Goodwitch. I was most impressed with her, far more than Haven's headmaster. Which says something."

While Maggie and the others pouted and pointed out that going to Beacon would take Arturia half a world away, Harry thought back to seeing the woman named, rather amusingly in his opinion, Glynda Goodwitch, coming to their school to speak to a few of the seniors. Before he had gone to Hogwarts, Harry had watched the Wizard of Oz and found it hilarious that a Goodwitch served as deputy headmistress of a school run by an (Oz)pin.

He wasn't certain he wanted Arturia to be that far away either but knew that if her mind was made up, that was it. *And I wager that anyone who faces her in the arena is in for a very hard time.* "Hehe, well, I wager that when the lioness of the Arcs roars in the Arena, she's going to put the fear of the Grimm into her foes," he said aloud, cutting through Maggie and the other's voices.

Thankful for the reprieve, Arturia smiled faintly at him, then leaned down and kissed his cheek, holding her lips there for a moment before pulling away, scowling internally. *Remember Harry is your brother, you foolish girl! No matter how attractive he's becoming. Besides, he's too young.* She was saved, somewhat, by her stomach deciding to growl in annoyance, a sure sign it was dinner time. "W, well then, as the lioness of the Arc's, I command you to feed me at once!"

Harry had rolled his eyes and said, "Don't worry, the feast will begin soon, your Majesty."

That had been somewhere in their first semester. And since then, Arturia spent almost as much time flying into Mistral to participate in the Tournament as she did at school, let alone at home. But Harry's prediction had been very accurate. Arturia Arc quickly became a fan favorite, with her nickname at Lighthouse following her into the arena. And soon enough, the Ice Queen became the tournament champion.

And then, the next year, she went on to Beacon. The farewell party was the stuff of legends, with Constance and a few others from her 'court' joining the Arcs at the estate, along with every other Arc, even Aunt Stacy.

"Er, this is the place, right?" Drake Corcra questioned Constance, looking at the house visible through the outer gate in some confusion, a confusion they had been feeling since arriving in Evig Låga, which, beyond its defenses, looked like a perfectly bucolic kind of town. "I don't know. This doesn't really look like a kind of place where you would think the ice queen would grow up, you know?"

"Right, she's so poised and intelligent and... and..." Terrence Rochel, who everyone bar Arturia knew had a crush on her, sighed, staring at nothing longingly.

"Articulate?" Constance asked teasingly, shaking her head. "Yes, I'm sure. This is the town they've told us about; this is the address I was given. And I think that is Hazel Arc at the gate. I've seen her occasionally at school. So smile, nod and be on your best behavior on this, our first freaking visit to the Queen's home."

"Hello. You all must be Arturia's friends. Welcome!" Hazel intoned, smiling at them all as she opened the front gate. In the distance, music could be heard, and figures danced in the lights of the very strange looking house.

Or at least to Constance, Drake and Terrence, it looked strange. Alan and Tabitha both looked at it in amazement, shaking their heads as Tabitha spoke for the two of them. "Ma'am, I have to say, your house is one of the coolest things I've ever seen!"

"Thank you, dear, but you'll have to thank my husband and his side of the family for this place. The Arc estate has been built by his family over time. You'd never know to look at it, would you?" She teased gently, causing all of them, even Constance, who couldn't quite see the appeal of something so haphazard, to smile.

They were quickly led to the party, where Arturia waited for them, nodding politely to her court. "Happy graduation to you all." She then looked back over her shoulder at Tia, one eyebrow arching commandingly. "Did I say you could stop?"

Tia rolled her eyes but continued to give her back and shoulders a chop-style massage. Of course, as part of the graduation, the entire senior class had fought in one-on-one matches in a small, quick tournament, with the winner and second place taking the valedictorian

positions. It had turned into something of an endurance test, and while Arturia had won, she had pulled something in her shoulders during one of the matches.

As Tia continued, Arturia looked over at Hazel, smiling at her mother. "As you can see, Mother dearest, the last of the guests are here. Now, where's the food?"

While Hazel laughed, Arturia's 'court' was staring at her. "Y, you're smiling," Constance said slowly. "And I mean an actual smile!"

Arturia huffed a bit. "Well, if I am not going to smile at leaving the pestilential anxiety-ridden hellhole that is Lighthouse high school behind us, when am I ever going to?"

"You've got a point but, your smiling!" Terrence stuttered, staring at her, blushing.

Rolling her eyes, Arturia shook her head. "While I might act somewhat standoffish in public, be assured that while I do prefer to keep my emotions to myself, that is not the totality of my personality."

Terrence raised a finger thoughtfully. "In other words, you're a Chuunibyō?"

Arturia's eyes narrowed, and she shook her head. "No, I am genuinely as standoffish as I normally act around most people. Nor do I go about talking about eternal darkness or revelry in the dark or such nonsense."

"But you do read those books kinds of books," Maggie interjected from nearby.

While her friends laughed, Arturia stared at her younger sister. "Betrayal, a betrayal most foul! and by my own blood!"

"And you say you're not a chuunibyō?" Drake teased and then sniffed the air. He was a dog Faunus and had a better sense of smell than any of the others, even Constance, although he noticed a few other Faunus around who were already staring soulfully towards the main segment of the weird building. "Something smells good."

"That will be the food cooking. Saffron, our oldest sister, and Harry are in charge of it tonight. Except for dessert."

"I was able to beat off Harry's charge at that," Hazel said with a smile, waving her hand to a small trestle table set nearby. "Admittedly, I cheated and finished the apple pies and other stuff far in advance and then stuck them in the fridge. But even so."

"I do not know, mother dear," Arturia said, that smile back on her face, causing all three boys, not just Terrence, to blush and even many of the locals to look away. When Arturia smiled, her normally severe countenance was completely transformed, and her golden eyes became far less cold looking. It wasn't like Tia, who simply didn't react much to anything. This was a more complete transformation, making it all the more startling. "That treacle tart of Harry's still owns a certain spot in my heart."

“Don’t let him hear that, or else he’ll be up all night making you one,” Tia warned and then shared a look with her older sibling.

They were interrupted in their plotting by Maggie, who smacked a wooden spoon down on Arturia’s hand then onto Tia’s, where she was still working on Arturia’s shoulders. “No, no abusing Harry’s kindness.”

Both of them pouted but subsided. It really would be unfair, after all.

“Is it really that good?” Constance asked, trying hard not to look at the three boys with them, who were just staring at the Queen as if she had just shattered their minds entirely.

Hazel sighed but nodded. “I think if my Harry doesn’t end up becoming a hunter, he could become a world-famous chef. He’s only gotten better under my and Saffron’s tutelage, and he was already pretty darn good when he started.”

“Speaking of,” Guld boomed, coming over and introducing himself and his brothers. Stacy was around there somewhere, talking to a few of the other locals, but had yet to come over to speak to the lady of the hour. Which was just fine by Arturia. “What are you five going to do now that you’ve graduated from Lighthouse?”

“Well, Tabitha and I are going to go to Haven Academy,” Adam began gesturing between them. “Constance is also going to go there, right?”

Constance nodded while Terrence said he would try to get into Beacon. Why that was, none of the others questioned, although Arturia’s cocked head and mildly confused expression made both girls look at one another and bite their lips. For someone so commanding, so good a fighter and tactician, to be so dense? It was hilarious.

“Unfortunately, my older brothers both hurt themselves in accidents on the farm recently,” Drake announced with a sigh. “Broken arm and ribs, respectively. So, I’m going to have to take a year off to help my old man around the farm. Without my brothers on the farm, we might not be able to produce enough surplus this year anyway to make enough money to send me to an academy. Still, a few added years of training myself might let me get in on a scholarship.”

The scholarships for the various academies were simple: a combat test. However, instead of fighting other hunters, you would fight Grimm or robots, depending on the school you were trying to enter. This allowed the cream of the crop who couldn’t otherwise pay for the academies.

Guld frowned. “Your parents can’t get a tax credit? I know everyone in Evig Låga does.”

“Of course not. We’re Faunus,” Drake answered bitterly. “Those kinds of government subsidiaries go to humans. Except maybe on Menagerie, anyway.”

“That’s not right,” Guld said with us shake of his head. “Don’t we have a few Faunus farmers?”

“Several dozen,” Hazel said with a nod gesturing to the other Faunus in the crowd of partiers. This kind of party was not just about Arturia. Several dozen other students had graduated from the local high school and were celebrating as well. “We haven’t had much of an issue with getting them tax cuts, although I know a few of our people like Stacy don’t exactly approve. But then again, your sister hardly approves of anyone.”

Arturia’s face closed down, as did Tia’s, although when her eyes went cold, Arturia’s went hot and fiery, angry. “Stacy doesn’t exactly approve of Harry and me still trying to be hunters when we can’t access our Aura,” Tia said to the elder’s students.

All of them looked a little uncomfortable. Everyone knew it would be suicide to try and fight Grimm without Aura, but none of them were going to say it to the two youngsters, even if Harry was here to listen.

Unfortunately, something else decided to intrude at that point. “Oh God, it’s more Faunus! Honestly, brother dear, why do you insist on bringing in more animals? We’ve already got more than enough of them.”

The two Faunus barely reacted to that. It was honestly quite mild compared to what they normally faced if they went to some towns in Mistral or a few of the smaller semi-independent towns. However, Arturia, Tia, Guld and Hazel, indeed all of the other people around them, scowled at Stacy as she joined them.

Stacy Arc didn’t seem to care, simply shaking her head, although there was a large glass of wine in one hand, and her face in the lights around them looked red, although there was only a slight slur to her voice. “One daughter becoming a lawyer, another daughter leaving Mistral entirely behind, and chasing fame and fortune in Tournament to boot. And now she’s brought home Faunus pets. Have you at least housebroken them?”

“Stacy, you’re drunk,” Guld said bluntly. “Don’t say anything that you’ll regret.”

“I never say anything I regret,” Stacy drawled back at her brother, shaking her head. “Thasss the difference between us, isn’t it? You’ve got a lot of regrets,” she spat out.

Guld seemed about ready to explode, although none of the younger set realized why, and the guests were indeed becoming quite uncomfortable at the moment, wondering if they could somehow get out of what seemed to be a deep-seated family issue rearing its head. Hazel, however, was in Stacy’s face a second later, grabbing her by the throat. “You have one second to take that back, Stacy Arc, or else I am kicking you out of this party and off of this estate. And you will no longer be welcome here, ever! Do I make myself clear?”

Stacy scowled but nodded, and Hazel let her go, turning in a huff, walking away to let her temper cool.

However, Stacy wasn't done humiliating herself. Instead, she turned to what she thought would've been a softer target: the two Faunus students. "Seriously, brother dear. It's bad enough that you and Father allowed Faunus to take jobs away from real humans, but now you're allowing your daughter to actually make friends with them! I suppose she probably wasn't able to make all that many human friends, as much of a cold BITITT!!!"

Guld's large fist slammed into Stacy the side of Stacy's head, in what for him was almost a gentle tap. But Stacy, despite being older than him, and having had a pretty good hunter career, hadn't trained herself in decades.

She collapsed bonelessly to the ground. With the nuisance done, Guld apologized to their guests, then looked around at his two brothers, who were staring appalled at their sister, and he growled out, "As the leader of Clan Arc, I hereby put forward a motion to expel Stacy from clan and town."

"W, wait, you don't have to do that for us!" Constance stuttered, but Arturia held up a hand.

"This has been a long time coming, unfortunately. I suppose every family has one black sheep. Stacy has been alienating everyone around her for several years. I have no idea why, nor do I care about past transgressions that she might be holding above my Father's head or what familial issues Stacy has allowed to rub her nerves raw or anything else. The moment Stacy started to attack Faunus; Stacy lost quite a bit of my respect. And then she insulted the two of you, my guests. If Father hadn't knocked her out, I would have been forced to challenge her."

Arturia's lips twitched into something approaching a grin, although it gave off such a feeling that both Faunus felt they suddenly felt as if they were in the presence of a predator. Which, while amusing for me, certainly would have been far worse for her than Father's love tap."

Around the gathering, other men and women came out of the crowd to be told what had happened with the 'worst Arc ever, of all time' as one person put it. Soon the other leaders of Evig Låga were gathered and gave their assent to kicking Stacy out. After all, she wouldn't be destitute or anything. She just would have to find someplace else to live. One of them even went so far as to say, "We were wondering why she hadn't been kicked out of the town before this, frankly. Family connections can only take you so far, Sirs."

The other man was a farmer Arturia recognized. He looked apologetic at that statement, but the other Faunus there all nodded firmly. One of the Faunus opined, "My family's been here for generations, your great-great-great-great-grandfather welcomed us here, protected us before the Faunus Revolution. That woman's opinions on us, they're from a bad old time."

"Or Atlas," said many of the others, causing laughter to abound.

Constance and Drake looked shocked, seeing that the Faunus here were given such a voice. It turned out that four of the other Faunus in the crowd were actually on the town council. They were a minority, but so was the population in relation to the humans, which had never been a problem for them.

“Good,” Paul nodded as everyone agreed. “I’ll take her home, and all then tomorrow, we can make it permanent.”

“Sorry to put this on you,” Guld began, but Paul waved his hand airily, saying that it was no trouble.

In fact, Paul grinned wickedly. “You know Stacy, and I have never really gotten along. She’s even called me a womanizing wino; can you believe that?”

“No, if only because most of her other observations are so far off of that it is a wonder, she can even see it all. So, her getting anything right is like the moon reforming: an impossibility!” Guld taunted and laughing resumes.

Still, Constance and the other guests were all feeling a little tense, as outsiders often would when seeing someone else airing their private matters in public.

This lasted until Harry and Saffron Arc came out of the main section of the house carrying trays of food, placing one on them on the table in front of Arturia.

Afterward, Constance and Stefan bought apartments in the local complex. And the Arcs, and Evig Låga, gained a reputation for being friendly to Faunus. And Aunt Stacy became the first Arc to be banished from the territory. The fact none of her siblings or neighbors spoke up in her defense said it all, really.

When Arturia left Lighthouse, things got harder for Harry and Tia. The new seniors didn’t really care one way or another about the two odd Arcs and were too busy with her own preparing to go on to their own lives, to really worry overmuch about the social scene in the school. So long as the Faunus were not being physically abused, they took no notice whatsoever one way or the other about what was going on.

Harry and Tia continued to stand up for the Faunus, and many of the Faunus themselves also fought back, although a few of the teachers almost actively discouraged it. Almost being that when they were called out on their anti-Faunus statements or stances, they routinely corrected themselves for a time until they thought they could get away with it again.

Meanwhile, Tia and Harry’s status within their grade began to degrade. Neither of them really cared about it, but the downside was that without their Aura, the combat teachers began to discourage them from becoming Hunters. Still, they bore through it, putting in more and more time on their own to train. Their other grades started to slip a bit, but they kept their position in the middle of the pack in the combat classes.

“If we can’t make them respect our willingness to become Hunters, then we will make them respect our skills,” Tia opined once to Harry, who nodded firm agreement while still lamenting the fact that he couldn’t access his magic yet. Very few of their fellow students had discovered their Semblances, but those that had are certainly head and shoulders above the others. And Harry and Tia both longed to knock a certain Mary Bell down a few dozen pegs.

During that year, the twins fell into a routine. They would wake up ungodly early to get to school on time, where they would be quietly annoyed for much of the day. At home afterward, they would train for most of the evening. At night every Wednesday, Harry and Tia would scroll Arturia, Harry setting aside his cooking during the week, something he made up for over the weekend.

Also on the weekend, the whole family would have a scroll call from Arturia, who seemed to be enjoying her time at Beacon. Although she had nearly led a one-woman war when she discovered she would have to share a room with her team, regardless of gender. Thankfully for both Arturia’s temper, she was paired with three girls. Girls who were in awe of her and rather silly and naïve, but since Arturia had been named their leader, she would either make them shape up or... well, with Arturia, they would just have to shape up. For at least the next few years anyway.

Of course, there were other problems. Arturia’s determination to continue in the Tournament was a major negative to the teachers at Beacon and its policies since she occasionally missed classes. But Arturia bulled through and was, of course, top of her classes in everything.

Even with time given to conversations with their older sister and their family, training dominated Harry and Tia’s life. This caused issues occasionally with the other siblings when they didn’t have time to play with them, but only once did it cause trouble between the twins. And even that was not trouble per se...

Harry let loose a loud grunt as he slammed down onto the ground, staring up at his sister, who had just smacked his legs out from under him with a blow from the flat of her practice sword. Not stopping, her practice broadsword, a massive, weighty thing Harry could barely lift, flashed down like lightning, moving to ‘kill’ Harry.

However, Harry was not willing to just let his defeat happen. He kicked out, causing Tia to stumble and then Harry was free, and he shoulder-charged up into Tia.

Normally, Harry would try everything to avoid becoming physical with Tia. She was far stronger, so if she could get a hand on Harry, it was normally all over despite his speed and reaction time advantage. This change of tactics took her by complete surprise, causing her to let out an off as Harry’s elbow caught her in the diaphragm. A hasty kick knocked Tia’s weapon out of her hand, and as she tried to reach for him, Harry ducked under one arm, kicking out hard.

The kick did nothing, not even staggering Tia this time, and she had twisted with Harry's movement. She grabbed his shoulder, and the next instant, Harry slammed face-first into the mat, Tia having performed a perfect shoulder throw. As Harry lay there dazed, Tia flipped him over onto his back before dropping her full weight onto Harry's waist, keeping him there even as Harry tried to wiggle out of her grip, pinning his shoulders. "I win."

Harry pouted, trying to fling his body this way and that, and when that didn't work, Harry attempted to lift his hips and try to bounce Tia off him. This didn't work, as Tia just bounced up and then came down against, using her stronger legs to pin Harry's in place.

It was when she did this that Harry realized the position they were in, as Tia practically ground herself against him and his eyes widened, staring up at her, struck not for the first time by the fact that Tia was well on her way to becoming a gorgeous woman. Her hair was still the same short hatchet job that she and Violet preferred, except for a long braid to one side of her head, marked by a few beads that she and Harry made when they were kids. Yet that only served to bring out the high cheekbones that all the girls in the family inherited from Hazel, the cerulean eyes that were a mix of their parents, and the small lips which were quirked into a triumphant smile at the moment.

Tia's chest was also quite large for their age, one of the biggest in school, regardless of grade. Indeed, she was already as large as Arturia had been when she left for Beacon, and Harry had a sinking feeling that she wasn't done growing in that area just yet. Her legs were shorter than Arturia's but well-formed, well-muscled as the rest of her, and her tanned skin had yet to fade or change, darker even than Violet's farmer's tan.

GAAH!!! Damn it!!! Harry felt himself reacting, a blush suffusing her features. "Ah, you win, you win! just get off me!"

Tia noticed how red Harry's face was and leaned down, not moving from her position. Indeed, she settled down a bit more as she leaned down, her face concerned. "Are you all right?"

"I, I'm fine!" Harry said, his tone coming out slightly strangled. "Just a little hot, that's all. If you could just um, ge, get off me please!?"

Not believing him, Tia leaned down and placed her forehead against Harry's, blinking. Then, she too began to blush as she looked down Harry's body, feeling her breasts, a solid B cup at this point, squishing against Harry's chest. For the first time in her life, Tia realized that Harry was a guy with a very nice body, muscles hardened by their constant exercising and training.

"U, Um, T, Tia..." Harry began to stammer.

And then Tia said two words that had Harry become almost as red as a tomato. "Ah. It moved."

Understanding instantly what she meant, Harry wrapped his arms around her, flipped them until she was under him, and then stood up abruptly. “W, Well, that was on an experience, you win Tia, but I bet I can beat you to the bathhouse!” He squeaked, his voice cracking even as he raced off.

Tia was instantly on her feet, hurrying after Harry, but she was also smiling as she did it. *That... that was fun. Hehehe.* Tia knew Harry was her twin. But to Tia, that didn’t mean she couldn’t enjoy little moments like this.

Later, watching Tia sink into the large communal bath across from him, Harry saw the small smile and inwardly groaned. *I am in for a very bad time, I think. Although is she doing this because she’s attracted to me, or just because she thought it was funny?* Even for Harry, that was a question he couldn’t answer. Nor would Harry find out which it was for years to come.

When Arturia won her second championship, she came home to celebrate once more. Both championships had been hard-fought contests against seasoned Hunters.

But in Arturia’s second year in Beacon, Harry and Tia were both too busy with their own third year at Lighthouse to watch her third championship match. That was when the school really started to put the kids through their paces as Hunters with several hours added on the end of the school day for more training. Mostly one-on-one training. Like the rest of Mistral, Lighthouse was gladiator mad.

When they went home, Harry and Tia were astonished that the family wasn’t celebrating. “What happened? Don’t tell me Tia lost,” Harry exclaimed as they entered the main household.

Hazel sighed, shaking her head. “She did, but we’ve already been talking to her for a while. Why don’t you two go and call her.”

“After your baths,” Rouge announced with all the seriousness an eleven-year-old could possess. “You both stink.”

After their bath, which, despite Harry’s protests, Tia still insisted they take together, the twins headed up to their favorite spot in the treehouse: a small triangular area at the top of the tree, set so that, if you wanted to, you could peer out of a window set into the roof to see the night sky, the area littered by bean bags.

The two of them leaned against one another and used Harry’s scroll to call Arturia, although when she answered, the scroll nearly fell out of Harry’s hands as the twins stared at the image of their older sister on the scroll. “You, you chopped your hair! W, why, I...” Harry stammered.

“Well, I did lose, as the family no doubt told you,” Arturia announced somewhat gloomily, her face set somewhere between a pout and a scowl. “I decided I needed to, to give

up something to signify that lose, and the need to rededicate myself to my training here in Beacon. My hair was my sacrifice.”

Harry blinked at that, not understanding why she would go that far, while Tia nodded her head. If she ever lost to Mary Bell in front of thousands of people, she’d probably want to do something drastic.

She said so, and Arturia barked a laugh, shaking her head. “Oh, it wasn’t that bad. My opponent wasn’t unlikeable or beat me in a dishonorable manner. I will admit I loathe losing, but I cannot despise her for beating me. Perhaps I have become too arrogant...”

She watched both her younger siblings for any reaction to that, but beyond a slight twitching of Harry’s lips, neither rose to the bait. “In any event, I have decided to halt my participation in the Tournament. I will instead concentrate on my studies here in Beacon, as I said. And it has also been pointed out to me that while my leadership of my team is among the best, I still need to work on building them into an actual team.”

That caused Arturia to scowl, and she shook her head in annoyance. She didn’t exactly get along with her teammates even now, more than a year after arriving in Beacon. But she had to get along with them for the next two years. Then she brightened up. “Perhaps in concentrating further on my studies here, I will be able to discover my Semblance. I have yet to discover it, to my shame.”

“If you are expecting to get sympathy from either one of us, don’t,” Tia answered tartly while Harry laughed, pointing at her in agreement. Arturia rolled her eyes, although the news that he and Tia hadn’t unlocked their Auras yet was worrisome. Both of them were going into their third year at Lighthouse, a five-year school, and it was unheard of for people at that age to not have Aura. *Oh dear, their life at Lighthouse will be even more difficult from now on.*

But she knew that the family had been trying for years now to find the right words to unlock the Twin’s Auras, and they hadn’t gotten any closer. Both Harry and Tia had reported that certain lines seemed to resonate, but no Mantra the family had discovered as yet had worked. *At this point, I am wondering if we need to take extreme steps. There are other ways to force someone’s Aura to activate after all. Putting the two in danger, perhaps tossing them off a cliff, say, might work. Or perhaps...*

“But you really lost?” Tia went on to ask, interrupting Arturia’s thoughts.

“Ah, Indeed I did lose, to some upstart who I believe is around your age Harry, Tia.”

Both twins looked at one another in surprise. “Someone our age in the tournament? Someone our age in the tournament who was actually able to beat you?”

“Indeed, and it is something of a pity,” Arturia let a faint moue of displeasure appear on her face in a way that she never would in front of anyone but her dearest siblings. Even in front of the rest of their family, she tended to keep a stiff upper lip. “I was going for my third time as

a champion, but I suppose it was not to be. And as I said already, I cannot say anything negative about the girl in question. Young Nikos is quite driven and an honorable and quite a nice girl. She even shook my hand afterward and showed no ill feelings because I had hit her several times, whereas before, she had apparently not been challenged over much. Indeed, in all her matches previously, Nikos won her matches without her Aura going below ninety percent?”

“Really? Someone got to the championship match without even being hit all that much? Did she just face inferior opponents before she met you?” Unlike Tia, who was frowning as she tried to place the name, Harry had never watched any part of the Tournament that his sister wasn’t directly involved in. He felt the whole gladiator combat thing was silly, to say the least.

“Really,” Arturia answered with a nod. “I’m certain it has something to do with her Semblance, but Nikos was always just a bit too quick, a bit too fast to dodge. The only few times I was able to really strike Nikos was when I disabled her shield and pinned her against the arena wall. I thought I had Nikos then, but she performed a midair flip when my spear was stuck in the wall. Before I could turn, Nikos had sliced at my back hard enough to knock my Aura below the twenty-five percent she needed to win.”

Tia looked all-too-eager to ask Arturia to give her a play-by-play. She had taken it far worse than Harry when they had been unable to get home fast enough to catch the match. But Harry, sensing that Arturia didn’t want to keep talking about her loss, changed the topic. “Well, when are you going to be home? You might want to wear your hair cut short like that, but that doesn’t mean it has to look so bad.”

Arturia hasn’t touched the top head, her normal hauteur diminishing. “You think you can do something with it?”

In response, Tia leaned forward, pointing at her own hair, her eyes lighting up and a smile on her face. “He’s lost none of his skill with hair over the years, sister dear.”

Arturia laughed at that. “Well, it will be good to be back in Ark Royale. Beacon is nice, but it’s a little odd being here in Vale. Socially they just aren’t the same as being back home in Mistral. And don’t get me started on the Anti-Faunus issue. It’s not as bad as in Atlas, but I have had to stomp on several heads even here in Beacon.”

Harry nodded then asked questions about Arturia’s teammates. he was somewhat dismayed that she didn’t know much about them on a personal level. It was all purely professional for her. Harry tried to convince her that their teamwork would become better if they were more friendly but wasn’t certain he got through.

That summer, Arturia did indeed come home, and the first night she was back, Harry went to work on her hair.

Soon, he was finished. Arturia’s hair had grown back somewhat, but she still wanted to change her style to something closer to Tia’s, so Harry had cut the back of her head short,

leaving two long bangs to frame her face to either side. The back was made into a series of small spikes in a circle. The front of her hair had also been allowed to grow out slightly, just to right above her eyes.

In all, it looked both a bit uncared for and a bit like she was wearing a crown, a very odd combination, but Harry felt it worked. "What do you think?"

Arturia stared at the image in front of her and slowly smiled. "I love it. It's magnificent, Harry, thank you." She turned and hugged him, leaning down and giving him a brief kiss on the cheek, before pulling back, frowning. "I don't think I will need to lean down to kiss you like that for more than another year if you keep growing. Stop it. Shorter is cuter."

"Only in girls," Harry laughed, not rising to the bait further than that.

Arturia pouted, turning away, shaking her head dolefully. "Where did my cute little Harry go? This one talks back too much."

"Your Harry grew up, Arturia," Harry teased, tickling her sides and then backing away as she turned, an elbow seeking his side. "You know that does always happen eventually."

"Bah! First, you ignore my orders, and then you attempt to take advantage of my guard being down!" She shouted, leaping towards him. "You will respect your Queen!"

OOOOOO

Three times Tournament champion Pyrrha Nikos sighed as she closed the door to her locker room before breathing a sigh of mixed relief and sadness. *It's getting worse! I don't know how long I can keep going like this, feeling so, so alone...* Pyrrha thought, before remembering the proud faces of her parents, the delight they'd always shown for her accomplishments. And how much money the family was getting these days because of her.

Pyrrha didn't quite understand it, but before she had entered the Tournament three and a half years ago, Pyrrha would've said her family was okay. Not well off or rich but getting by. Now, it seemed as if they had been barely staving off creditors, and her parents had grasped the idea of her fame with both hands.

At first, Pyrrha enjoyed the challenge, the thrill of combat. There was a reason why she had wanted to train as a Huntress for so long, a reason why she had pushed herself so hard. While a large part of Pyrrha wanted to help people, a shield against the largest threat to human life out there, Pyrrha had always known that she was an adrenaline junkie. She loved combat. She loved to fight, to challenge herself.

Now, going into her fourth championship run, much of that enjoyment had faded. Pyrrha sighed, staring at her private locker room, remembering what had happened earlier.

*Trevor was an adult, a real hunter! A middle-aged man with more than a decade of service to Mistral and the people behind him, and he asked me to go easy on him? And he looked, he looked as if he didn't even have a chance! Is this what it's going to be like from now on, people assuming they can't beat me, so they don't even try? While bad-mouthing me behind my back? I heard him mutter about how stuck up I am. I'm **not** darn it!* Pyrrha scowled, leaning her head against the locker in front of her.

She looked up in shock as the door opened, and a young woman walked in. She might well have reacted angrily at her time alone being interrupted, especially when she had locked the door behind her. But it was someone she recognized. "Miss Arturia!?"

Arturia blinked, then looked down at her scroll and back of the door. "Did the organizers make a mistake and book us both to the same dressing room? Despite our matches happening at different times, that is rather bizarre."

Pyrrha bit back a giggle, shaking her head. The Ice Queen's sense of direction was a well-known joke among the other gladiators. "I didn't know you were back in the circuit."

"I am indeed," Arturia said with a slight nod, then she smirked challengingly at Pyrrha. "Let's just say I've got a few new tricks up my sleeve to try on you when we inevitably meet in the champion match."

Even as a champion, Pyrrha would have to work her way up through the ranks to get to the championship match, which was more than fine by her. At the lower levels, she still ran into people who were willing to fight her with everything they had. By the time the championship match last year occurred, her opponents had begun to mail it in, so to speak.

Looking at the younger girl, Arturia cocked her head to one side, her eyes narrowing. "You look contemplative. Don't give up the match to me just yet."

Pyrrha smiled at the older girl, remembering their match in her first Tournament with some wistfulness. Arturia herself was a three-time arena champion, and that match had been one of the most difficult Pyrrha had ever had in the arena.

"You will give me your all," Pyrrha said with a smile, hoping it wasn't strained as she stood up. "Won't you?"

Arturia raised a wintry eyebrow, a glare crossing her features. "How is that even a question? When have I ever given anything but my best and demanded it of others?"

For the first time since the first match several weeks ago, Pyrrha found her warrior spirit rising, and she grinned back at the other woman fiercely, delightedly. "And you will get my best too!"

With that, Pyrrha sweat-dropped slightly, gesturing around them. “Would you like me to show you where your own changing room is? I can download a map to your scroll and even mark its position once we find it.”

For just a moment, Arturia kept her glare going and then sighed, nodding. “If you would please.”

The thought of facing Arturia in the last match kept Pyrrha going through the rest of that week. And then came her day off. A real one, as Pyrrha had made certain her managerial staff and parents realized that she needed a day just to herself.

As Pyrrha stood in the Nikos household’s sitting room alone for once, Pyrrha hummed to herself, looking between the keys to the new Bullhead a sponsor had sent her family and a large stack of comics. “Decisions decisions...”

Shrugging, Pyrrha pulled out a coin, then flipped it into the air, holding it there for a moment, then twirling it in place with her polarity power before letting it fall. After a moment, Pyrrha stood and looked at the coin, shrugging her shoulders. “Tails.”

With that, she moved over, putting on a long trench coat and fedora. Then Pyrrha got on her scroll, calling Mistral’s air control office, registering her flight to a small, out-of-the-way town she’d once heard of. *Maybe there, I won’t be recognized. Who knows, it could happen, right?*

OOOOOO

Thanks to the national furor that the Mistral National tournament created, the schools across Anima, even Hunter training schools like Lighthouse, got a few weeks off every summer. And this year, unlike the last two years, Arturia would have time off from Beacon, as she had decided to challenge the Tournament once again. Arturia had discovered her Semblance last year and was eager to test it out against the reigning champion, who, according to everyone in the family, was the same young girl who had beaten Arturia for the championship three years ago.

While his father, Violet, Tia and Saffron watched the Tournament almost religiously, Harry still hadn’t watched the thing. Without Arturia in it, he just had no interest in one-on-one matches. He just did not see the appeal of tournaments and other circus acts in a world with the Grimm in it.

Regardless, it was a good thing, as both Arturia and Tia’s birthdays were coming up. And Harry’s too, but he tended to forget his own until someone handed him a present, usually his mother. This year, the time off would let them celebrate both birthdays together for once, a special occasion since Arturia had missed two birthdays before this point and had only rarely come home since going to Beacon.

Just as importantly, Harry knew that Tia was having an even worse time of it at school than he was. Harry, for all that his sisters told Harry he was good-looking, was not all that popular at school. He had a few acquaintances, but that was all, and only a few times over the years had a girl attempted to flirt with him, let alone ask him out.

While the fact he had yet to unlock his Aura might have had something to do with this, the majority of Harry's happy lack of romantic entanglements probably had more to do with Tia's response to such moments. Her normally neutral face would close down further, and her hands would curl into claws. The one time she'd been gripping a thermos when a girl came up to flirt with Harry in the cafeteria, she had crushed the poor thing and hadn't even noticed.

In contrast, Tia's lack of Aura and the fact Harry was quite happy to act as the overbearing brother had no impact on the male side of the population. Indeed, it seemed to Harry that Tia's lack of aura, her normal paucity of expression, her assumed innocence and good looks had created an odd appeal. Not a week went by without Harry hearing other boys in the locker room comment about wanting to protect Tia while others wanted to see if they could be the one to get his twin to really react to something.

What Tia would be reacting to was usually left up in the air. Aura or no, Harry fought dirty and had no hesitation whatsoever in resorting to violence at the drop of a hat if someone said something about his sister(s) that they shouldn't.

And yes, Harry was well aware his twin was gorgeous. Not a day went by without this causing one issue or another. Harry resolutely ignored it, hoping it would fade as they got older. That it hadn't yet was no reason to stop hoping it would, in his mind.

Worse, while Harry only had a few idiots jealous of him for his close relationship with Tia, many other girls in Lighthouse were jealous of Tia. Be it her general looks, her breasts in particular, or the amount of male attention she got and ignored, Tia had no real female acquaintances, let alone friends. And while Harry's stance on Faunus had garnered a lot of support from the male population, the chief racist at the skill was still Mary Bell, and she hated Tia with a passion.

So considering that both his favorite people would be home and need a pick-me-up, Harry wanted to do something special for their birthdays. So did Tia for Arturia, and she was already off with most of his siblings and their mother to shop. However, Harry had bowed out of heading to Mistral to shop with five girls. He had other plans.

Violet cocked her head to one side, shaking her head as she held the keys to the RV. It was the only one of the three family Bullheads still here after Hazel and the others took the van-type Bullhead. The other one, a small, two-person number, was being used by their father. While technically retired, Guld was still called on occasion to lend more firepower if needed. "Really, Harry, you're going to spoil them."

She then laughed as Harry simply grinned up at her. *Although he doesn't have to look up very far anymore, does he?* While Harry would never match Violet or their dad in height, he was still quite tall at six feet four. "Yes, yes, I know that's the point, but have you ever actually cooked Asiatic before? I know I haven't seen you try."

Asiatic was one of the smaller social societies that made up the Anima continent's number of small, scattered town-states, only loosely aligned with one another or Mistral proper. They had several scattered villages out there and were well known for their food and several martial arts styles. And their food was entirely unknown in Evig Låga.

"No, but you know how Tia is for hot food. And Arturia is always happy to try something new, so long as there is a lot of it," Harry replied.

"You got a point," Violet answered with another snort of laughter. "But will you be alright on your own? I know you've driven the RV before, but still, it's a temperamental beast." The twins had gotten their Bullhead licenses a year ago. Given the distances and lack of roads, getting a Bullhead license instead of a regular one made more sense.

"Just because I can't drive your tractor doesn't mean I can't drive the Bullheads sis. There's a lot less things to hit in the air if nothing else," Harry answered.

"And you're sure you don't want me to come with you? I can pawn off lookin' after the farm for a day to one of the farmhands." Violet wouldn't want to, admittedly. Two of the cows were due to calf any day now, but even so, if Harry wanted her help, that would take priority.

"I'll be fine. Just going on a day trip to another town, I'll be fine."

Violet's eyes narrowed accusingly. "That's what you said the last time the family went out on a camping trip, and you chose the spot. And we got ambushed by Grimm, a full pack of Beowolves, barely upon touching down."

"Yes, those poor Beowolves," Harry retorted dryly. "And we still had fun."

"We had smores. Of course we had fun. With smores, you could have fun in a wet paper sack." Violet chuckled one last time, before, with some misgivings, handing over the RV keys. "You sure you won't miss seeing Arturia's match?"

"Heh, we both know she's going to win. I have to leave now if I want to get back before nighttime."

Hours later, Harry finally arrived at his destination, setting down in the town's small landing zone, although despite being small, it was quite crowded, and Harry had been forced to land on the outskirts of the area. This was a small Asiatic-dominant town known for its spices and sauces. This meant it was the only place within flight range Harry could get some of the ingredients he needed for a few dishes he wanted to prepare for his siblings. He spent a few

moments shutting down the RV, then picked up his scroll, opening the door and stepping out as he read through the list of ingredients one last time.

He didn't notice the small crowd nearby until someone slipping between two other bullheads bumped into him, sending his scroll flying. "Oh jeez! I..." Harry trailed off, finding himself arrested by jade eyes, almost the same color as his own.

After a second, Harry tore his eyes away from those eyes. As he did, Harry noticed that woman, who he noticed was a redhead, was wearing a kind of baggy trench coat and hat. It almost looked like she was acting out a scene from one of his dad's old-time spy movies. The ones that were so cliché that Harry, Magenta, and Mum could only throw popcorn at the screen booing and hissing, despite his outrage at their not understanding the classics.

"Er, I'm sorry..."

"I'm sorry, sir I..." they both said before breaking off, staring at one another and laughing quietly, although the woman was also watching Harry warily.

Their awkward moment was interrupted a second later by several shouts nearby. "I tell you she had to have gone down this way. That's her Bullhead right there. There's no other place to go, and it's not like she'd run away from us."

"I can't believe it! The Invincible Girl here in our town! Thank the Brothers for that Champion Watch app!"

"Right!? If we're lucky, we can even get a handshake, let alone an autograph!"

The shouts caused the woman in front of Harry to flinch and look around wildly before hopping into the open bullhead, staring at Harry pleadingly. At that point, Harry had a split-second decision to make. Of course, being Harry, it didn't actually take that long, and he quickly hit the close command on the bullhead's ramp.

Hiding inside the large Bullhead to one side of the door, Pyrrha Nikos listened as the young man she had bumped into fielded some questions from the crowd as he picked up his scroll from where it had gone flying. A few moments later, Harry opened the entrance, sticking his head inside. "They're gone. Although, if you really are trying to escape the paparazzi, Miss, you're going to have to do a lot better job of hiding your identity."

Sighing, Pyrrha nodded. "I suppose that means you want an autograph for your help?" She questioned rhetorically. *It was nice of him to give me a head start on avoiding the crowd, but I wish...*

"Er, no?" The black-haired young man shrugged, his tone conveying confusion. "Why would I? Given that appellation you must have something to do with the Tournament, but I don't watch it except for my sister's matches," Harry said with a shrug.

Pyrrha looked at the young man closely, trying to see any sign of recognition. However, he simply looked back, smirking a bit. "What's so funny?" she asked, frowning, wondering if the young man was making fun of her or was just waiting for Pyrrha to go away before he called in her presence on Champion Watch.

"Fame is rather annoying to deal with," the young man said instead, surprising her. "Sorry, I just have to smile at seeing someone else dealing with this. I realize that sounds petty, but there it is. Still, perhaps we should introduce ourselves? I'm Harry."

Taking the cue from him that last names weren't needed right now, Pyrrha let her wariness fade and held out a hand to shake. "Er, call me Pyrrha." For the life of her, Pyrrha couldn't figure out a false name to use and had a moment to panic that Harry would recognize her real name rather than her moniker for some reason.

But it didn't happen, and Harry didn't attempt to bring her hand up to kiss the back of it, which Pyrrha always secretly thought was quite pretentious. "Pleased to meet you, Pyrrha."

Now more at ease in his presence, Pyrrha took in Harry's appearance and had to flush slightly at what she saw. He was quite handsome, she reflected, and there was something mesmerizing in his eyes. *Oh dear, now I understand why people say my own green eyes are so alluring.* Struggling to ignore that and the fact this was the first time in years she'd had a conversation with a young man who didn't have ulterior motives, Pyrrha remembered what Harry had said a moment ago. "Er, so, do you often have to deal with the media as well?"

"Not personally," *not in this lifetime anyway*, Harry added mentally. "But my sister does."

Pyrrha nodded at that but didn't inquire further, assuming that anyone famous would rather not like to be outed. Certainly, that was the case with her anyway, and Pyrrha set aside the slight curiosity she felt on Harry's sister. *I don't recall anyone with black hair and green eyes, though.*

"But I have to tell you, you are outfit is... well it just won't work," Harry said, changing his words quickly as he unknowingly cut into Pyrrha's thoughts.

"I, I know, but I honestly didn't expect to be recognized so quickly," Pyrrha said, poking her fingers together and looking away. "I thought I was only... that is..."

"You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to," Harry said with a chuckle. "But would you like some help?" This world or his last, Harry was always willing to lend a hand to someone if he felt they needed it. And weren't utter swots, anyway.

She blinked, then cocked her head to one side. "What do you mean?"

Her tone was somewhat wary, knowing precisely how many of her fans would love to get her alone. *Ugh, those online forums, only once, never again!* Pyrrha still felt a little guilty

about how she had used her polarity semblance to tear her computer into pieces, but the guilt was fleeting as she recalled what she had read on those forums. *I don't know what's worse, those forums or the Champion Watch app.*

“Have you ever thought about dying your hair?”

Pyrrha blinked, one hand rising protectively to her hair, then she looked closely at Harry, knowing that her hair was one of her main ‘charm’ points. “You, you really don’t know who I am, do you?”

Harry shook his head. “Sorry, I don’t.”

“No!” She shouted before going on in a lower voice. “Er, n, no, don’t apologize for that. It’s, it’s nice to not be recognized,” she admitted shyly.

Harry smiled wanly at that. “Too used to people trying to use your fame, or trying to take pictures or invade your personal space?”

Pyrrha nodded wryly, reflecting that whoever Harry’s sister was had obviously not been as private about her complaints as Pyrrha about her concerns.

His smile turning even more sympathetic, Harry gestured her back into the Bullhead. “We have some things in one of the cupboards back there, although I don’t know if we have enough dye left. Come on, let’s see what we have, and if we don’t, I’ll nip out and get some.”

“Nip out? What, I mean, no, you don’t have to, that is you’ve already...”

Harry shook his head with a smile. “Trust me, I helped my sister run away from the reporters several times when we went out to Mistral or other places. If I left someone else to such a fate, she would never let me hear the end of it.”

With that, Pyrrha turned to the cupboard and pulled out some of the things within, frowning pensively. “Well, thankfully, there is enough dye here, so I don’t fall further into your debt. But I’m uncertain what those would do to my hair. They seemed to be designed for blonde hair rather than red.”

“Yep,” Harry said with a nod. “And I have no idea what your hair will look like either. Are you still willing to try?”

“Yes, please,” Pyrrha answered instantly, then shyly asked, “Er, exactly how are we doing this?” She was embarrassed at how much she was asking this complete stranger for help. Indeed, Pyrrha was putting herself in his hands, but somehow Harry radiated a certain level of friendly dependability, which she liked. And this whole idea, dying her hair and going even further incognito than she had planned, tickled her funny bone.

Quickly, Harry had Pyrrha in one of the RV’s chairs, leaning her head back and into the sink. The position wasn’t comfortable for her neck, but that feeling went away as Harry began

to work with her hair, running his hands through it. “Good grief, do you do anything special for your hair? This is almost as silky as my oldest sister’s, and I know exactly how long she spends on it.”

“The same sister, or another one?” she asked sleepily. Harry’s touch on her head was, well, it was very nice. “Wh, where did you learn...And I don’t know how I’m ever going to pay you back for this.”

“Heh, another one. I have seven sisters in all.” Pyrrha’s eyes snapped up at that, and she spluttered in surprise for a moment before subsiding into a pile of goo. Harry hadn’t stopped his work. “And don’t worry. I wanted a food taster around for things that I’m going to cook for a birthday party. You could call it serendipitous that you fell into my hands like this.”

“That sounds rather ominous,” Pyrrha giggled.

Harry laughed. “Who knows? I’ve never cooked Asiatic before, and one of the sisters whose birthday is coming up is a big fan of spice...”

“OH...that makes sense,” Pyrrha smiled. “Actually, that’s why I’m here at all. I’ve always liked Asiatic.”

“Then I think we’re both going to be well-served by this meeting, aren’t we?”

Pyrrha snorted, biting back a whimper. *By the Brothers, this is just way too good.* “More me than you. After all, you can go around without being mobbed.”

“Out in public. At home, I get mobbed all the time. One brother among many sisters remember.”

“And how many of them have you wrapped around their little fingers?”

“I’ll have you know that only three of them are little,” Harry huffed with mock-indignity.

Pyrrha laughed, and the two of them continued to joke, the oddity of their meeting having somehow worked to bring down some of their defensive walls. And both of them had those, even though Harry’s were but pale ghosts of the former reality.

It turned out Pyrrha was a great fan of pop culture and several dozen comics that Harry had only sampled a time or two, always busy being with one of his siblings, the family in general, and training. Whereas Pyrrha had always had a tiny bit of time, she could devote to other things, and after her first year as Champion, she had quickly decided that her family wasn’t one of those things.

Pyrrha was an only child, and she and her parents were not close even before she became famous and they started to push her ever more into the limelight. So she lapped up the homey stories about Harry’s family. They sounded like a fun group, even if she was determined to not ask questions about his supposedly famous sister.

Eventually, the dye job was finished. It had turned Pyrrha from a normal redhead with hair as crimson as blood to a dark reddish-brown color, and Harry nodded in satisfaction. "It's supposed to turn my sister's hair completely black, so I think this is a good compromise."

Pyrrha nodded, staring at herself in the mirror. "I don't think I like my hair down like this," she murmured.

Harry shrugged. "I could do something with your hair too, but not your original hairstyle. Remember, you're supposed to be distancing yourself from your former appearance."

"True. And I've never worn my hair like this, so there's that."

"I also have these," Harry chuckled, pulling them out from somewhere. "Maggie's glasses. My next youngest sibling, she's a bit of a bookworm, and she developed the need for these pretty quickly. She also developed the habit of leaving them in various places, hence why we have a spare set in the RV."

Pyrrha took them from his hands and then gently set them on her nose before quickly taking them off. "Your sister is blind," she announced definitively, blinking her eyes. "I'm sorry, but I can't wear those."

"I figured," Harry sighed. "But contacts are tricky to use if you're not used to them."

"I think the hair alone is enough, thank you. And the more you talk about hiding your sister like this, the more I'm wondering if you're a family of spies rather than Hunters," She teased, hoping that went over well. This had been quite fun so far, and she hoped that this back and forth continued.

Harry chuckled, holding up a hand to indicate a touch.

Pyrrha stood up and moved over to the bathroom to use the mirror, coming back with her hair loose down her back in a series of wavelets. "So, how do I look?"

"Pretty good, actually," Harry said, blinking and scratching at his cheek, flushing a bit at the inadvertent compliment.

"Th, thank you," Pyrrha answered with a faint blush of her own.

They looked away from one another, then Harry glanced over at the time and realized it was already pushing noon. He said this aloud, and the two of them left the bullhead after making sure no one was outside. As they headed into the town proper, the conversation turned to food naturally given Harry's pronouncement.

Pyrrha proved to be something of a gourmand, having been to hundreds of restaurants in the past three years for one reason or another. When they began to walk around, she even picked better types of sauce and was better at spotting the fresher vegetables than Harry was.

However, when they passed a gun store that was offering twenty-five percent off of dust rounds, this proved to be too much for Pyrrha's inner Huntress. The second after she and Harry finished reading the advertisement, she dragged an amused Harry into the store.

Fifteen minutes later, she was shaking her head, holding over her shoulder a large bag full of several magazines for her rifle. "I'm **so** sorry about that!" She said, bowing her head towards Harry as they continued on their way. "I got somewhat sidetracked there for a bit."

"It's fine," Harry said with a laugh. "I told you, my family has several Hunters in it, not just my sister."

"You did say that." Pyrrha nodded, calming down slightly from her embarrassment. "Although you never said whether or not you were also in training. Where do you go to school?"

"Lighthouse, and yes, I am training to be Huntsman."

"What weapons do you use?" Pyrrha questioned excitedly.

Harry smiled dryly. "We're actually still arguing about that one. I've been trained with the longsword, which has not always been pleasant, let me tell you. I can't remember a day that I haven't gone to bed sore in years. My twin is somewhat torn. Part of her wants to be a sword and shield sort of fighter, and the rest of her wants to use this giant monster sword that she would design personally. Seriously, she drew it once, and let me tell you, it looked absolutely terrifying."

"Is it a mecha-shift weapon?"

"I don't think so, no. Not from the drawings Tia showed me anyway."

"And you?"

"The family longsword? Not a bit of it. The sword in question is a bit of a family heirloom and goes back in our family for generations."

Pyrrha gaped at that in shock as they continued down the street back, looking around at the stalls and shops. "That's amazing! The history must be fantastic."

"I like to think so," Harry chuckled. "Our family might've fallen on hard times the recent generations, but we're still well off and upholding the whole honor of the Hunter thing."

He winked as he said it, but Pyrrha could tell he was serious about it. "Have you discovered your Semblance yet?"

Harry shook his head, grimacing. "I, no. I haven't even woken up my Aura yet."

Pyrrha nearly stumbled in shock. "I, what?!?"

“Heh, yeah, that is the general response these days. Neither my sister nor I have been able to figure out a way to awaken our Auras and believe me, we’ve tried some crazy stuff, putting ourselves in danger in a lot of different ways, but nothing has worked.”

“No mantra has unlocked it? Your family’s mantra might not, but perhaps another would?” It was well known that every family in which Hunting was a historical profession had its own mantras. And sometimes the mantras words didn’t work.

“Both Tia and I have felt reactions to a few words. Sacrifice, love, duty, courage, but not enough for the words to unlock our auras,” Harry answered with a sigh, the word love causing Pyrrha to bite back a girlish giggle. “We think we’re close, but something is still missing. And despite what Tia thinks, I think it will be different for both of us. She very much believes her key will have something to do with sacrifice. Me, I don’t know.”

Harry was actually growing certain it would have to do with death in some way. But what it might be, that he didn’t know.

For a few moments, Pyrrha was silent, taking in this surprising information, then she asked hesitantly, “Why, why do you want to be a hunter?”

Pausing, Harry looked at her then shrugged. “If I answer, will you?”

Pyrrha nodded. That seemed more than fair after all. Even after only a few hours of getting to know Harry, it seemed to Pyrrha that Harry wasn’t the sort of person who would willingly bow to parental or family pressure as she had in embracing her fame. *My decision to be a Huntress and go to Beacon next year is actually a rebellion, not something my parents are proud of.*

“I want to help people,” Harry answered simply. “I want to be an example that people can rely on, a shoulder that they can lean on in times of trouble. Heh, if that doesn’t sound too pretentious.”

“No, no! it doesn’t at all. That’s pretty much why I wanted to be a hunter too,” Pyrrha answered with a smile.

For a moment, they were quiet, picking up some samples of several different kinds of dumplings. The consensus was that this variety wasn’t quite as good as the type they’d tried before hitting the dust store. “The pork inside it doesn’t taste as nice, although I think the outer dumpling itself is actually of a better quality,” Harry mused as they walked on.

Pyrrha smiled, watching as Harry exchanged greetings with a few of the cooks, asking questions, and answering before they moved on. As they did, Pyrrha continued to watch Harry. He had a kind of charisma to him, a personality that seemed to bring that same pleasant connection out of people as he talked to them.

About an hour later the two of them were past the market area and moving on. "Well, that was fun," Harry laughed, glancing over his shoulder at his now full backpack. "Food and exploration is always more fun with other people."

Pyrrha laughed at that, but her laughter trailed off as a few of the people who had been attempting to accost her before passed them by, speaking amongst themselves, their voices sounding petulant and angry. "Goddammit! This entire trip was a waste. Just another damn false sighting! If this keeps up, I'm going to give Champion Watch such a bad review it'll shut down out of shame."

"I don't know, the food here is okay. It's not a total waste," said another noticeably obese one, as he munched on some of the food from the market stalls.

"You and your stomach!"

"At least I'm not thinking with something a little lower," the fat one retorted.

"Like you wouldn't try! She's Pyrrha Nikos! The invincible, untouchable goddess!"

Pyrrha grimaced, then her eyes widened, and she turned to look at Harry, who was also watching the trio, then looked back at her, one eyebrow rising. "Invincible Girl?" he asked aloud.

That drew the fan boys' attention, and all of them turned to stare at him incredulously. Pyrrha turned away slightly, grateful that she'd bought a pair of glasses early on in their walk rolling her eyes and shrugging her shoulders dramatically as if she couldn't be bothered with this conversation, a bit of impromptu acting that caused her eyes to widen as she realized what she'd done.

But her heart began to pound in her throat as Harry asked, "What's this about an Invincible Girl? That sounds like something out of a very poor romance novel."

That statement caused Pyrrha to giggle, some of her anxiety leaving her even as the fans began to answer.

"You've never heard of the Invincible Girl, Pyrrha Nikos! She's a three-time arena champion, and she's going for her Fourth! No one's even been able to slow her down since her first year, and even then, not much, so it's obvious Nikos is going to make history and become a Four-time Champion! All while still being in high school."

"Pyrrha beat the then three-time champion Arturia and is now going to break her record."

"I don't know, Arturia's pretty strong," Harry answered, choking back a chuckle for some reason none of those around him could guess. "At least from what I remember when I used to watch that kind of thing."

The fanboys continued to speak about Pyrrha excitedly, about how she'd never been touched in the arena, about how she was invincible, about her beauty. If it wasn't things that Pyrrha had heard so often she wanted to gag, she might well be blushing. As it was, she was too busy cringing and being creeped out to feel any embarrassment.

"Here, I'll show you her latest match. She's so amazing!" said one of the fanboys.

But Harry shook his head, waving them off with a laugh. "Not interested. I tend to find all of those public persona things a little annoying myself."

Pyrrha breathed a sigh of relief at that, but she didn't turn back to Harry until after the fanboys turned back into the marketplace, cajoled there by the overweight one.

"That one should not be talking about food, but a diet," Harry muttered, then turned his head slightly to look at Pyrrha.

Even as she nodded agreement to that, Pyrrha looked at him sadly. "So now you know. If you want an autograph I..."

"I just told that lot that I'm not interested in all of that fame nonsense. Why would I suddenly change my mind?" She breathed a sigh of relief and then blinked as Harry bowed his head towards her. "Besides, like I said, I know what it's like to be famous too, you know. So I know that it's important to leave that kind of thing behind. All I see in front of me is Pyrrha, my friend. None of that other stuff."

This earned him a wide, beaming smile that put the images of a smiling Invincible Girl the fans had shared before to shame. "Thank you!"

"And as your friend, I think the most important thing is to listen. So do you have anything you want to get off your chest?"

"I, yes, I... I have..." Pyrrha stumbled to a halt, wanting to take Harry (her friend!!!) up on this offer but unable at first to get out the worst. "I, everyone, even my enemies put me on a pedestal. They, they see me as this, this Invincible Girl, I..."

As Harry led her along the street, all of Pyrrha's anxiety tumbled out as if a dam had burst. Her parents pushing her forward, creating the Invincible Girl angle. Pyrrha's frustration with how the fans never left her alone. Her growing sense of distance from the world as more and more people treated her like someone beyond normal people. The fact no one treated her like the normal girl she wanted to be or saw the real Pyrrha Nikos at all, a process that had started well before Pyrrha had entered the Tournament and only gotten worse. "It's gotten to the point where people don't even try their hardest to fight me, so they don't have to feel bad or something afterward about my beating them. While also trying to tar at my reputation with whispers and lies."

Through it all, Harry listened to Pyrrha, seeing many correlations between his past life and Pyrrha's, although thankfully, while it seemed as if people were eager to laud Pyrrha, they weren't looking for her to save them from a violent, deadly enemy as had been the case with him. While that didn't make Harry any less sympathetic at the enforced solitude and backbiting Pyrrha was subject to, it did help him keep perspective, as Pyrrha, close to the problem as she was, didn't have.

As Pyrrha wound down, Harry nodded slowly, watching as Pyrrha gasped, covering her mouth as if appalled at how much she had said, looking around desperately, then becoming grateful as Harry had led them down a side street away from what little crowd there was here. "I can see that. But, unless you actually want to run away, I don't see any way of removing yourself from that kind of image. Unless you want to throw a match?"

The affronted look that Pyrrha gave him had Harry backpedaling quickly. "I wasn't saying you should; I was just asking if you ever thought of it. It's one way to get off that pedestal of yours?"

"No," she said coldly. "I have not thought about throwing a match."

"All right, eesh, I'm sorry I brought it up," Harry muttered, shaking his head, deciding not to mention that Arturia would certainly give Pyrrha her all. Indeed, the very idea of his sister going easy on someone was impossible to contemplate. *She certainly doesn't go easy on Tia and me when she's home and we train together.* "What about running away?"

"I would have to permanently wear a disguise which I don't think I am mentally built for, honestly," Pyrrha answered with a sigh, although she was still smiling. Not only had this been the most fun she'd had in years, but Harry (her friend – yes, it bore repeating in Pyrrha's mind) had also allowed her to vent without judging her. It felt amazing to get all that off her chest, although she was still wondering who Harry's sister was that he would be so aware of how bad being famous could be. "Any other ideas?"

Harry thought about it, remembering how his own Boy-Who-Lived label had never really been his own. Rather it was something he was saddled with. *I could have tried to use it if I had the training, and as for being on a pedestal, that can be kind of useful too, so long as you're willing to do so.* "Well, I do have a few ideas. One is you can change your brand in the arena."

Blinking in confusion, Pyrrha was about to ask what he meant by that, but their conversation was interrupted by a scream. Their walk had taken them through the entire town and out the other side, and by the time Harry had mentioned Pyrrha changing her brand, they were on the outskirts of the town staring out over a large series of various types of farms. In the distance, a long wall marked by barb wire and guns stood. A large chunk of that barbed wire was gone, though, and two of the guns as well, while the others couldn't seemingly point inwards.

But closer to hand, something large and powerful stalked out of the surrounding farm area.

It was a Grimm, but a type Pyrrha had never seen a picture of before. The Grimm stood on four feet, and its lower body looked almost like a horse. But it had another body stuck into this first one mid-back that looked like the horse's rider had been merged into it. The head on top of that rider was small, circular and completely covered with a normal Grimm's mask, as was the face of the horse portion of the strange Grimm. Its hooves ended in claws, its short tail in a flail. The upper body's arms were long and thin, ending in Grimm claws.

The body atop the horse portion slumped to one side as the creature stalked forward. Then when it stopped, the rider segment seemed to come alive. Instantly it rose, and from its mouth, a loud screech was heard, causing many of the farmers nearby to scream. Some fell, mouths frothing to the ground as the others just fled, crying out in fear. The rider segment's limbs lashed out like whips, elongating and catching two farmers.

And behind it came more Grimm. Lots more. Many were cut down by the exterior defenses, but this monster must have somehow gotten close enough to destroy two of the guns. Now in this weakened zone, Beowolves leaped over the walls. Several fell into the ditch on this side of the wall, but more came on. And in the sky above, Razorwings began to appear, diving down out of the sky.

Razorwings were harpy-like Grimm, the Anima equivalent of Nevermore in Vale, the most numerous aerial type Grimm around. They were slightly more prone to attack on sight but couldn't go anywhere near as high as Nevermore, meaning they couldn't fly very far.

"What the hell!?" Harry muttered, staring in shock. "Grimm aren't supposed to attack out of the whim. Not unless..."

"Not unless they're smart! Smart enough to know they can cause the terror that will bring others and even take out some of the automated defenses. We need to do something," Pyrrha said, already charging forward.

Harry grabbed her arm before she made it two steps and found himself almost pulled off of his feet, only barely getting them back under him as she turned to them with a furious expression. "What are you doing!? I..."

"Weapons!" Harry barked back. "Do you have one?"

Pyrrha tsked, looking away. She had left her weapons, Milo and Akuo, behind, believing that doing so would help distance Pyrrha from her public persona.

That was answer enough for Harry, and he turned, racing down an alleyway, "Come on! That shop where you bought your Dust bullets is this way. They had some guns on display and some other weapons too."

The screams continued behind them as the two of them ran, but Pyrrha was shocked when Harry began to shout out, "To the weapons store, to the weapon store, arm yourselves!"

Many of the villagers turned their attention away from the approaching Grimm to Harry, some turning from where they had been about to bolt inside, hoping that their houses would prove some defense against the sudden onslaught. Many resumed that course, but more than a dozen gathered before Harry and Pyrrha smashed the gun shop's door open.

There, even more surprisingly to Pyrrha, Harry took command. This was something he had picked up during his time with the Defense Association back in his old life, and as Hermione had known, Harry had proved to be a good leader and teacher. And in this life, Harry had been trained by his dad to lead, as well as on terrain. After all, even a town like this was terrain, and using it to their advantage was important.

"Pyrrha, look around and grab whatever weapon suits your fancy. You're probably going to have to take point a lot," Harry ordered.

Pyrrha found herself obeying, even as a part of her shrieked internally *he doesn't have Aura! How is Harry, or any of these people, going to fight?* She grabbed her weapon, and it was then that she finally was able to voice her concerns as Harry was already working with the gun shop owner to hand out guns to the rest of the locals.

Elsewhere, the sounds of battle could be heard as the local constabulary responded to the Grimm assault. But just by the number of different guns Pyrrha could hear firing, she knew there weren't many of them.

The rifle Pyrrha had grabbed was one that looked almost as if it had been based around her own, it wasn't a Mecha-shift weapon, but it had a sniper scope and could go to rapid-fire. It was also the same caliber as they got bullets she'd already bought today. She also grabbed up a javelin, complete with a sheathe that went over her back and a kind of square shield. It was wood instead of metal, bar the outer edge, but it was a shield, and that was enough for Pyrrha right now.

So armed, Pyrrha moved back to Harry and hissed out, "Harry, you're not... these people, none of them have Aura."

"So what?" Harry barked back at her, almost looking angry, before taking her arm and shaking Pyrrha gently. "Aura is simply a help, not be-all and end-all! And this is their home. Are you saying they shouldn't fight for it because they might endanger themselves? They're already in danger."

Faces around them firmed up at that, as did Pyrrha's, and she stopped protesting, just nodding her head. "Just don't get killed," she hissed instead. "I can't make my first real friend in years and then lose him in the same day."

"I certainly don't intend to die here either," Harry chuckled, even as he picked up a longsword.

"You're not going to grab another weapon?" She asked.

Harry shook his head. "All my training is with a longsword, and I don't want to take a rifle from someone else. Now that, I will take." With that, he moved over to the register, and after a second, the store owner opened it up, pulling out headpieces that looked like they had both a microphone and a speaker. Harry took all of them and headed back outside.

Outside the shop, more than two dozen men and women had gathered and had taken up arms. And all of them, despite most of them being far older than Harry, were now looking at him for instruction. "How many of you have had some marksmanship training?"

A few of them had, being farmers and small townfolk, dealt with Razorwing attacks occasionally and even land-based attacks before, although nothing like this one.

"All right, you five stay together and move to the center of the town. There is a large building there, right?"

"You mean the Mayor's building? It doubles as a personal building and office," one of the men supplied.

"Yeah, that thing. Get up high and start laying down some fire on the Razorwing." Harry then broke off three other groups, handing out a headpiece to each group. Harry assigned one to meet up with the local police and liaise with them. A second he assigned to go with the first. "Start setting up some blockades around the central plaza. Get as much heavy furniture out onto the roads as you can and do the same to the houses up to the second floor. Any children are to be moved into the basements. I know houses around here all have panic rooms, use them for the kids, force the parents to work with us as much as possible. We can't just all hide and hope this blows over."

Everyone there nodded, and Pyrrha realized that people were still joining them. *By the Brothers, Harry's truly galvanizing them. I can't see a single face here that looks scared any longer, just determined.* With that, Pyrrha felt her own shoulders straighten. *And I will need to be his shield, their example, their symbol. So be it.*

As she thought this, Harry assigned the last group to start evacuating people away from the outer edge of the town. "Hopefully, that will have already begun, but Pyrrha and I will go around with the rest of you to gather up as many people as we can and push them all into the center of the town. Pyrrha will take the lead on any fight we run into."

Harry sent Pyrrha an apologetic glance, but she simply smiled at him as many people looked at her in confusion, not connecting her first name with the image of the Invincible Girl thanks to her different hair color. "All of you know someone else around her. Get them moving! Your buildings won't be any defense against the Grimm."

“Not unless you aren’t feeling afraid and they can’t find you. And under these circumstances, with that thing out there?” Grunted one of the older men.

Once more, there was a wail in the distance, and everyone around Harry shuddered. Here, the group was far enough away from the creature not to feel the overwhelming fear that Harry and Pyrrha had seen wash over the farmers, but that cry was yet another tool of terror in that Grimm’s hands.

“Does anyone know what creature that is? Any weaknesses?”

The same old man spat to one side. He looked like a retired Hunter, one of his legs replaced by a peg leg and an eye missing. He shook his head slowly as he put on one of the headsets. He was the apparent leader of the marksman team. “Miss, that’s an S class Grimm called a Nuckelavee, and it doesn’t have any real weaknesses.”

“Oh, that wasn’t what I wanted to hear,” Pyrrha murmured, even as she and Harry raced off.

OOOOOO

When she and the girls returned, Hazel spent several minutes puttering around, hiding presents. Despite their ages, all three of her soon-to-be birthday children had not grown out of the habit of searching for their presents before time. Although she felt it was mostly done for the fun of discovery rather than any desire to get their presents ahead of time.

When she was done with that task, she entered the main sitting room, frowning thoughtfully. “Odd, I would’ve thought Harry would be back before we were.”

Maggie looked up from where she was already reading a new book, glancing over at the TV, the real reason she was here rather than in the treehouse, staring at the clock above it. “Harry wasn’t going to get the regular groceries mom, he was going to go to some town that specialized in Asiatic cooking. He wanted to find something that would be extra spicy for Tia.”

Hazel winced a bit. Of all her children, Tia was the only one that truly delighted in spicy foods, and the last time Harry had come up with a new dish for her, it had been so hot several of her other kids had actually been in pain from attempting small bites. “I just hope he remembers to label it this time.”

“I’ll be Asiatic anyway, I think will be able to tell the difference,” Magenta answered dryly, even though she had been one of the victims.

Hazel nodded at that and was about to get going get out of a book of her own to read. With Tia watching the two youngsters and everyone having had a big lunch, the mother eight (with even Saffron still living at home) could have a nice evening to herself. But then, Haze’s scroll began to ring, and she frowned, looking over at it. Then, it beeped twice, then twice more, in a code that caused Hazel to hiss in anger.

Magenta looked up from her book in concern as Tia led the twins in from the bathing area. “Mom?”

“That’s a code, darling. A Grimm Wave is attacking some village somewhere. I wonder where...” With that, Hazel opened up her scroll and looked at the name. “Chian, hmm, I’ve heard of it, but...”

A crash reached her ears then, and she turned to see Violet standing in the entrance, having just come in from the farm. “I... Chian? Th, that’s where Harry...”

Before she could even finish, Hazel was already moving, moving to grab up her weapons. This broke Violet out of her stasis, and she moved to do the same. Though she had never had her Aura unlocked, balking at the journey to the Arc Butte, Violet had still been trained up to that point and had her own heavy support-style weapon.

While Magenta gathered the twins to her, Tia raced out to the training hall, where she grabbed up a weapon as well. Hazel tried to stop her when she came back, but only for a second, and then the trio was off once more in the family’s large Bullhead, hoping they would get there in time.

OOOOOOO

Harry sliced at a Beowolf, cutting its arm off, then ducked under a blow from another Beowolf before stabbing upwards, spearing the lunging Beowolf through the chest. He twisted, using the body of that Beowolf as a guard against a third, as several shots rang out, killing the first Beowolf he dealt with and several others in the area.

Around him, the militia force he’d basically created milled about, laying down fire as best they could, with only a few more ex-hunters holding the front line. Thankfully Pyrrha was there, firing, using her shield as best she could, dancing around her opponents. It was almost like a choreographed dance for her, showing an amazing amount of agility and sheer physical skill.

To one side, a group of cowering people looked up at their saviors, some of them staring at Pyrrha in particular. “It’s her...”

Rolling his eyes, Harry barked at them. “Get up and start moving! Head towards the center of the town.”

All of them did so, although several of them paused as they stared at Pyrrha. She was still dancing in and among another group of creepers, her javelin lashing out, her hair flying as she punched, kicked and stabbed. “That really is her! The hair’s the wrong color, but those moves and those eyes, that’s the Invincible Girl! We’re saved.”

“Not if you don’t get moving,” Harry shot back, grabbing the speaker by the ear and wrenching him around before kicking him in the rear. “Pyrrha’s just one young woman. She can’t be everywhere. If she’s here saving you, how many other people are going to die!?”

That caused the man to shut up quickly, and he, and the rest of the fanboys that Harry and Pyrrha had passed by, began to move in the direction Harry had indicated.

Pyrrha returned to Harry’s side a few seconds later, having dealt with the last of the land-based Grimm on the street, now firing up at several circling Razorwing. Hmm, they seem to be concentrating more on the center of the town. “I don’t suppose anyone has any kind of string or some rope?”

“Why would you want rope?” Harry questioned in surprise.

In response, Pyrrha held up one hand while the other continued to fire her rifle into the air.

The shield she had picked up earlier hung limp on Pyrrha’s arm, tattered and shattered. It looked about as much defense as a tiny plate. Indeed, it was probably an active danger to her.

At that sight, Harry grit his teeth. *If I had my magic, I could simply conjure one up! If I had my magic, I would be slaughtering these Grimm like nobody’s business! Stupid Aura!* He then gasped and turned, looking between a few of the houses having seen a flash of a large, black creature moving there. “Beware left flank!”

The Nuckelavee smashed through one of the buildings to one side, and with it came his fear Aura. “GRREAAHAHAHAHH!!!”

Most of the defenders collapsed instantly, going to her knees and gibbering in fear and terror, some of them even pissing themselves as their weapons fell from suddenly nerveless grips. The Nuckelavee’s charge had brought him close enough to strike at one of the ex-hunters, and the blow lifted the older man up off of his feet, shattering his weapon and arms, overcoming his Aura.

Then the creature turned to look at Pyrrha and Harry, and Harry raised his sword determinedly. *Even without magic, I’m not going to go down without a fight.*

But Pyrrha charged forward, hurling the remnants of her shield into the creature’s face, already dodging a blow from one of its side arms, kicking up and off of the ground while firing several rounds into the things face.

They bounced off of its armor, doing nothing but angering it, and Pyrrha couldn’t dodge the next blow and her own automatic response to try to raise a shield costing Pyrrha. She was flung sideways, crashing into a building to one side.

But her Aura stood her in good stead, and Pyrrha stood up groggily, firing once more at the creature, trying to keep his attention on her. "Get away!" She shrieked at the top of her lungs. Even Pyrrha was being affected by the Aura of fear this thing possessed.

Harry wasn't. Thanks to his past life, Harry was almost used to life and death situations, and as the Grimm moved forward to finish Pyrrha off, he ducked under its flail-tail, stabbing upwards. However, the sword in his hand was no Arc family blade, and when he stabbed forward, the blade skittered along the creature's bone armor, not penetrating.

The creature turned, kicking out with one of its back legs, but Harry dodged under its kick, slicing at its belly again. That seemed to irritate the Nuckelavee and actually draw drew a bit of blood. The creature shrieked again, but Harry grimaced and did not relent, ducking underneath it again, stabbing upwards again with both hands.

But the creature was smart. It hopped backward, lashing out with its front feet this time while also using its arms to kill several of the other defenders. Harry blocked them both, redirecting the attacks and bringing his sword up and around again, only to find it blocked by one of the creature's arms. Marred with streaks of blood, it's skin was proof against the simple sword in Harry's hands.

Then Pyrrha was there, stabbing forward, and her spear crashed into the creature's shoulder, puncturing down into its body. To her shock, this blow wasn't fatal, and Pyrrha was smashed out of the air and into the ground, where she rolled, coming up to her hands and knees, glaring defiance pulling her rifle off of her back and firing again and again.

The creature ignored her in favor of attacking Harry, who blocked as best he could. "Harry, retreat. We can't win this!" Pyrrha shouted as she shot again, wishing with all her might for her own weapons.

"No, if we hold it here we..." That was as far as Harry's altruistic statement and, above all, optimistic statement got before the sword in his hand shattered into dozens of pieces. He stumbled back, and the next blow caught him across the chest, hurling him backward in a welter of blood. One gash opened up his cheek, while another his shoulder and a third his chest.

"Harry!" Pyrrha shrieked.

Harry had been fighting so well since the battle began who knew how long ago that Pyrrha had almost forgotten he didn't have Aura. Now, she stared at Harry seeing the blood covering his entire chest and dripping on the ground around him even as Harry tried to push to his feet.

Snarling in rage, Pyrrha reached out with her polarity power. Gesturing with both hands, she directed her power toward several nearby lamps. With a grimace of effort and the cost of the last three defenders' lives bar Harry and herself, Pyrrha tore them out of the ground before

sending them whirling through the air to crash into the creature, taking the Nuckelavee off of his feet and sending it tumbling down the street.

It rolled with the blow, getting to his feet, obviously hurt but more than game to keep going, but there was no more for the moment, as Pyrrha had used this distraction to rush forward's, grabbing Harry, blood and all up into her arms in a princess carry and away, smashing through a house and out the other side before running through the thankfully abandoned, empty streets. "Don't die on me, oh please, don't die on me! I, I was serious, you know," she babbled. "We just became friends, and I..."

Harry's wet chuckle interrupted her, and she stared down into Harry's emerald eyes, astonished he could even try to laugh at a time like this. But again, thanks to his past life, Harry had a truly incredible pain tolerance. *Compared to the Cruciatu*s, this is nothing. "Sorry about that. I wish I was more help."

Pyrrha gaped down at him, her head shaking slowly from side to side. "Y, you've been as much help as anyone could ask, more! Without you, this whole town might have fallen by now. Now we just need to get you to..."

Again, the Nuckelavee screeched from nearby. And this time, it was answered by howls and caws from above as more Grimm began to attack the beleaguered town.

"I think whatever kind of safety we could find there would be very fleeting. Despite our efforts, this is not heh, going well," Harry murmured, looking down at his chest, ignoring the wound to his shoulder and cheek.

The one across his chest was serious as it had opened him to the bone, which he could see through the gash, and Harry thanked his lucky stars that it hadn't been just an inch below. If it had been, the end of the claw slash would've been right over his stomach, and he might well be looking at his own intestines right now. *I've seen human intestines before. It wasn't nice then, and it wouldn't be nice seeing my own now.*

Pyrrha looked towards the sounds and then down at Harry, clearly torn. "I, I don't know anything about first aid beyond, well, putting on bandages! I, I don't..."

"Fuck, I wish I had my Aura," Harry groaned. "Wouldn't it help me heal quickly? I know that's part of what Aura can do for straightforward wounds like this. If you've got enough Aura anyway."

"Of course!" Pyrrha exclaimed. Looking around, she saw an abandoned house and hurried inside, setting Harry down on the sofa there. Once he was laid out, Pyrrha leaned forward over him, cupping his face, ignoring the blood from his cut cheek. So close was Pyrrha that for a moment, Harry thought she was going to kiss him. While a pleasant idea, this sure as heck wasn't the time for it.

Instead, he felt warmth building up in her hands, where they kept his face. Harry knew what that meant, and his eyes widened. *“Pyrrha, wait!” If she doesn’t have enough Aura, even trying will knock her out!!*

But Pyrrha, frantic to help her friend, wasn’t listening. As her Aura pulsed into his, Pyrrha began to murmur, the words carried into Harry’s soul by her Aura in her attempt to unlock his own as she tried to make up an Aura mantra on the fly, mixing in what had once worked on her and what she felt would serve Harry remembering their conversation earlier, adding a very personal thought on the fly for no reason she could figure out then or later.

Regardless, she didn’t regret it as the words tumbled out faster than Pyrrha could think. *“For it is in facing adversity that we rise to assume our duty. Unbound by death, we become the defenders of humanity and those we love. With my arms beside thee, rise to become the hope of the world, becoming a paragon of virtue and courage.”*

As Pyrrha spoke, Harry felt each keyword sinking into his soul, creating ripples, each one building on the one before it until, finally, his soul was ablaze with energy. When Pyrrha finished, there was a brief moment of vibrant, tense anticipation, and then to Harry’s shock, he felt power surging through him. Power, his Aura and Harry’s magic came to him now as his Aura **finally** was unlocked.

His wound started to slowly close as Pyrrha gasped, collapsing to the floor as she shivered, staring at Harry in shock. *“That, that took nearly all of the Aura I have left!”*

Harry nodded slowly and held a hand over his wound, intoning a single word. **“Heal.”**

She watched in even deeper shock as Harry’s wounds closed, and Harry stood up. He was still shaky from blood loss, but his eyes were flaring, and he was grinning like a hungry shark. *“All right, let’s make some **magic!**”*

He looked down at Pyrrha, who tried to stand up, but couldn’t. Her limbs just were not obeying her. Harry leaned down and gently picked her up with a smile, setting her on the sofa. He set her there, along with her gun, which Pyrrha had somehow remembered to strap to her back before picking him up moments ago. *“Stay here, okay?”*

“You can’t. You just had your Aura awakened Harry, there is no...” Pyrrha stammered.

He held up a hand in front of Pyrrha’s face and then was suddenly holding a rose as if he’d conjured it into being. He held it out to her and winked. *“Let’s just say that while I had no idea how to unlock my Aura, I knew for certain what my semblance was going to be. That’ll do for an explanation for now, but I owe you one later.”*

There was a snarl from outside, and several Creepers burst through the open door, piling onto one another in their haste to get at Harry and Pyrrha, who they must have spotted from outside.

Once more, Harry's grin looked like that of a shark as he turned towards them. "After all, without you, I wouldn't be able to do this."

With that, Harry lifted his hands and after a second, cutting spells flashed out from his hands, slicing the Creepers into ribbons. As the Grimm began to fall apart, Harry's brows furrowed. *That was weird. I had trouble crafting the image of the spell in my mind, but once I did that, I didn't feel any kind of drain on my reserves. Strange.*

While Harry was somewhat bemused, he wasn't the only one, as Pyrrha stared in wide-eyed astonishment. "I, I've never seen anything like that... w, what kind of semblance can do that? And create rose out of nothing?":

"Magic, like I said. And I do owe you an explanation later."

Pyrrha nodded, but it was all she could do to keep her head up. She was so exhausted! Pyrrha had only very rarely pushed herself to the brink of Aura endurance like this, and that was coming back to haunt her now. But as Harry turned away, Pyrrha somehow got her feet under her and pushed herself to her feet, ignoring his earlier words. "I, I might not be worth much, but you need someone to watch your back," she said, her rifle to her shoulder as she shot out into the street beyond Harry. The last Creeper fell, its throat burst from the large Dust round.

Harry looked at her, his lips quirking wryly. "I thought you said you were out of Aura."

"I am, but as you said earlier, that doesn't matter, Aura is only an aid to a battle, not the only reason you can fight in the first place. And, besides, my Aura always recovers quickly."

A group of Beowolves burst out into the street from another street. Harry watched them come and then gestured at the ground, having a much easier time imagining this spell for some reason, although it did cause his head to hurt for a moment. Nevertheless, the ground rose on his command under the charging Grimm, becoming spikes which spitted the pack, slaying them all. "Alright, but conserve your energy for now. I can at least get us to that big bastard without your help."

Pyrrha's eyes narrowed. "Why do I think that explanation is going to be a doozy?"

At that, Harry turned from scanning the area around them, the light of real humor appearing on his face as his sharklike smile shifted into something far more humorous. "Did you just use the word doozy?"

"Oh, hush!" Pyrrha grumbled, shooting out another Beowulf that had been trying to come up behind them. "And can I say I find it a great comfort that whatever you can do now, you still don't have eyes in the back of your head?"

Harry laughed at that and then around thoughtfully. "Now, if I was an S-class Grimm, where would I..."

“GRAHAHAYAAYAEAAAAA!!!!”

Just then, they heard a shrieking noise coming from the center of town, and as one pointed toward it. “That way.”

Harry led the way, his fingers twitching, sending out slicing bits of magic that to Pyrrha’s eyes looked almost like energy discs. They apparently didn’t take nearly as much Aura as they should, Pyrrha noted since Harry could keep moving easily without pause, grinning like a wild man.

Soon they burst out onto a road leading to the small square in front of the mayor’s house. There they found the defenders, the humans packed behind the barricade in a large crowd, with almost eighty defenders lining the barricade. Their weapons were a very mixed back ranging from a large Hunter-style gun to a spear made from a broken mop.

Many of the defenders and the crowd were now down from the Nuckelavee’s scream, while groups of Creepers were smashing themselves against the barricade from numerous streets. Above, the defenders on the roof of the Mayor’s house at least were keeping the Razorwings at bay. But that was scant comfort to those on the ground.

As the two of them came into view, a shout went up. “It’s them, The Invincible Girl and Harry! Yes! We’re not lost yet!” Shouted some of Pyrrha’s fans and some of the Hunters Harry had mobilized, their words mixing and carrying over one another.

New hope went into the defenders at that, and they began to fight back harder, while some of those on the ground put out of action by the scream also slowly got to their feet. The shout also pointed out their arrival to the Nuckelavee, who turned towards them.

By that point, Pyrrha was already firing, and Harry gestured again, grimacing as his brain throbbed in pain. *Best stick to just earth manipulation now that we’re playing before a crowd. And it’s faster too. I can’t afford the seconds it takes to imagine an attack spell right now.*

Under Harry’s command, the ground underneath the Grimm attacking the square suddenly grew spikes, but the Nuckelavee reacted instantly and leaped upwards. It placed its feet daintily on top of the spikes even as the rest of the horde and the makeshift barricade all around the square was replaced by spiked stone.

Harry growled, and then at another gesture, the spikes grew still spikes which began to shoot towards the monster Grimm. It dodged through them, shrieking in response. But neither Pyrrha nor Harry was bothered by the fear it generated now, and they kept up the attack even as more of the other defenders stumbled, overcome by its power to create fear.

“Pyrrha, around to the right flank,” Harry said, watching as one head turned to twist and watch her, and the other kept watching him while he moved to the left. As it did, the limbs began to enlarge, shooting towards Harry.

A wall of stone rose at his command, and then, he gestured with his other hand, having been crafting a second spell in his mind despite the pain this caused him. "Say hello to my little friend."

From the other side of the wall, a large stone lion burst out of the cobblestones, roaring in challenge. It charged towards the Nuckelavee as the Grimm twisted around, slicing off the top of the lion's head. But the stone creature still barreled into the Grimm, stone jaws latching onto its already injured shoulder. The Grimm tore itself free, but it was shrieking now not in rage or to cause fear but in pain.

Harry was about to shout for Pyrrha, but she was already lining up her shots. Her eyes flashed with a black light for a second as she used her polarity power to guide her shot forward into the wound, blowing the Grimm's arm off at the shoulder.

She fell back, rolling into cover behind a shattered stall as Harry gestured again, grimacing now as the pain in his brain grew. More walls appeared, while the people defending the square reached the top of the mass of spikes and began to fire at the other Grimm they could see around the square rushing into the attack.

This kept them off Harry and Pyrrha, and Harry juke to one side, racing in that direction while launching more stones spikes up from the ground at the Nuckelavee, dodging between the stone walls. This kept the Grimm's attention on him, even as its remaining arm whirled around, shattering spikes and walls with ease.

Pyrrha, who had leaped to a nearby rooftop, shot again. The last round in her rifle impacted the stub of the Nuckelavee's arm digging in deeply. As it did, the upper portion of the beast fell to the side. Something within its construction had been hit, and it could no longer move very well.

Now crippled, the Nuckelavee attempted to flee. But a grimacing Harry dropped to his knees and slapped both hands onto the ground, another transfiguration spell once more changing the landscape. The s-class Grimm and several others found their feet suddenly being grabbed by hands of stone immobilized, and Harry shouted, "Pyrrha, now!"

Before the Grimm could break out, Pyrrha bound forward, leaping up onto one of Harry's stone walls, coming down with a spear she had grabbed from the defenders a moment ago using her polarity power.

The horsehead of the Grimm let out another cry and tried to rear up but couldn't escape. Pyrrha's spear, a heavy, metal spear from somewhere, caught it through its neck from behind and bore down by her weight and Pyrrha's polarity power pushing on it with all her might, stabbed deep into the monstrous beast.

The horse segment fell forward, letting out a last, terrible whinny as the rider tried to raise its arm weakly. But it found that arm too grabbed by a hand of stone even as blood

started to run from Harry's nose. His mind was well out of practice of using magic, and doing so on such a scale after just having his access to it restored was taking a major toll.

"Die, beast!" Pyrrha roared a challenge pulled her spear out, her polarity powers once more coming into play as she had to repair the damage done, flattening out its edge and then thrust forward again, with all the power in her body. A second later, her spear tip smashed into and through the Nuckelavee's neck, bursting out the other side.

As the Nuckelavee began to come apart, Pyrrha gasped, the impact of using her Semblance now taking a toll, and she fell backward.

Rushing forward, Harry caught her as she fell, but he stumbled to his own knees, which meant she landed in his lap. She quickly vacated the premises, a blush on her face as she rolled away, gasping. "Are... are we done yet?"

"I, I don't think so," Harry grunted in turn, staring all around them.

More Grimm were coming forward despite the defenders' best efforts to lay down some kind of cover fire. Both of them pushed wearily to their feet, and Pyrrha asked sardonically, "I don't suppose you have more energy for those attacks of yours?"

"Barely any will left, really," Harry admitted. "but I figure if we fall back to the wall, we might make it. We can at least pile up the bodies there with the townsfolk helping us."

"Grimm don't 'pile' when they die. Their bodies decompose as that one did," Pyrrha answered dryly. "Still, I suppose as last stands go, this is as good as any."

Harry was about to respond in a rather pithy way to that when there was a chattering noise from above and a shout of, "Harry, get down!"

Harry's eyes widened, and he flung himself sideways into Pyrrha, baring her to earth just as there was a machine roar from above. An area around them was cleared of Grimm, then Hazel was standing in the street, as everything around them had exploded outwards, killing the Grimm there. The horde behind that first group faltered for a moment staring at her, and Hazel cracked her head from side to side before pulling out her large hatchets. "Come get some!" She shrieked, launching herself forward.

Pyrrha stared, agog. That was the only word appropriate at the moment for Pyrrha's expression, and if Harry had enough energy, he probably would've been laughing. "T, that woman, she was speaking your name."

"That's my mom," Harry said simply.

The three-time champion blinked, then shook her head. "That's your mother, and you have a sister in the Tournament. Is everyone in your family terrifying in one way or another?"

“Pretty much,” Harry said with a nod, watching as Violet arrived. She was armed with a massive backpack on which lay two Gatling guns which she aimed with the use of long handles. She shouted out, “Make it rain!”

Tia landed next to them a second later, looking at Pyrrha, then kneeling down next to her twin. “Harry, are you all right?”

“B, better than that,” Harry grinned despite the blood still dripping from his nose and the ruined remnants of his clothing, pointing at Pyrrha. “She unlocked my Aura.”

Tia twisted around to stare at the normally redheaded woman, her eyes widening. “Thank you,” she said simply, then moved forward, taking a stance facing against the few remaining Grimm, gesturing behind her. “Take a rest, you two.” In her hands, she held a truly massive two-handed sword. “I will protect you.”

Before this fight, Pyrrha would have objected to that on many grounds, not least of which being that Harry had mentioned that his twin didn’t have her Aura activated either. As it was though, she simply nodded and leaned herself against the mansion’s wall as more of the defenders came out, eager to join in retaking their town. “Yes, I do believe everyone in your family is terrifying. Including you, Harry.”

Harry didn’t reply. He was too busy sleeping. Which, Pyrrha thought, was just a lovely idea, as she finally allowed her eyes to close in exhaustion.

End Chapter

I really struggled with where to end this chapter. I had a further four thousand words to add, but looking through it, I honestly have to admit that it made no sense to speed through things leading up to the original climax I had planned for the chapter. It was all too staged to be real. So that will probably be the next chapter of this work when I come back to it, mixed in with Harry experimenting with his magic once more. But AGAIN, that won’t be for a while. Remember, this was a teaser chapter, guys, so it will not be built on further until after ATP and Semblance are done. Unless any of you are holding out on me and know the cloning technique?

Regardless, this is [Vimesenthusiast](#) wishing you a Happy New Year!