

Happy second-to-last night of Hanukkah, folks! So, here is the next episode of *Semblance of Hope*. It's small, but that was purposeful to let me have enough time left for the rest of the fics this month, one of which is already up.

Episode 8: Crux Point

Ranma led the way through the night over the plains toward the ancient city. The rain, which had begun just as they left the mountains, was making moving across the small plane towards the distant city annoying, but the cloaks they all wore kept the rain out of their weapons, which all of them were carrying just in case. Even for Ranma seeing or hearing anything in this torrential downpour at night was next to impossible. It would be all too easy for them to simply walk right into one of the horse-like Grimm out here.

However, despite Ranma's paranoia on that score, the group was able to reach the outer wall of the city without any issue. "Let's get a feel for what the outer wall looks like, as well as what anyone can see up top. This rain is going to continue for most of the rest of the night and into the day, let's use that cover to our advantage."

The others nodded, and Ranma pointed at Nora, deciding to lighten the mood a bit. "That you need to make certain what you're shooting at, Nora. Don't shoot at me when you see me coming through the rain, okay?"

Nora pouted at him. "Hey, I'll have you know I have never yet been the cause of any friendly fire!"

"My hair would disagree with you," Ren interjected dryly, while Ranma smiled seeing tense shoulders relax throughout the group.

"That wasn't friendly fire that was an experiment that got out of hand. And it only happened once Rennie, let it go!" Nora huffed, pushing Ren's shoulder lightly.

"As far as I know, the science club at our old high school is still trying to figure out what you did to create that pink gunk of yours. And since it permanently changed a strip of my hair to pink, no, I am not going to let it go," Ren argued back.

"Let's get a move on troops, this rain might last most of the day, but even so, we are on a bit of a timetable," Jaune interjected.

Ren and Nora fell into step with their leader, still arguing, but moving off. Pyrrha paused before following them, grabbing Ranma by his shirt and pulling him into a kiss. Ranma kissed back for several minutes before pulling back. "Stay safe, okay?"

Pyrrha nodded, and then rushed off after her team from the wall. Ranma stared after her, until she disappeared in the rain, which, unfortunately, did not take very long. With a sigh, he turned in the opposite direction, moving around the outer wall of the city.

As he went, he examined the architecture of the wall, finding it somewhat like the outer wall of castles he had seen in books back in his old world. It was made of stone obviously, mortared together, and the battlements above were lined with matriculations, sloping downward so that the individuals on top could fire down at people or dump stuff on them even if they were standing by the foot of the walls. Segments of the walls had been smashed inward, but not in many places on the first side of the city or the second. There he found what looked like one of the gates, smashed down when the Grimm assaulted the city, with a few bushes growing within it in places, and the inner grill thing having been rusted to the point that Ranma could make out how red it had become even in the nighttime rain, while standing on this side of the gateway.

Weird how the mind works. I can remember the name for the sloped arrow slits on the battlements, but I can't remember what that thing was called? Ranma reflected, as he rounded another corner in the wall.

Above he spotted a large built up guard tower, whose outer wall had been smashed open. The first he had seen had its roof smashed off. Ranma almost thought he saw movement, but through the torrential downpour, even Ranma couldn't see more than a few yards in every direction around him, not the six stories he would have to be certain he had seen something.

All in all he thought the large town, he wouldn't call this city, had been decently protected. *And it still fell to the Grimm when its army was away. I gotta wonder again, why most people don't have their Aura unlocked.*

Still thinking about the ancient battle that had claimed this city, Ranma spotted movement ahead of him, and slowed down, before coming to a complete stop, letting the people in front of him come towards him. Soon the movement he'd spotted coalesced into the younger teams of team JNPR, who all moved towards him, with Jaune giving his report.

"We found two gate houses, both of them smashed to pieces, a large segment of the wall was also smashed down between them. Beyond that, there wasn't as much damage to the wall as I would've expected. Two of the guard towers showed some signs of battle, but we found a third that didn't look damaged at all. It might be a good entry point, although we couldn't make out much details obviously."

"Huh, sound thinking. Do we want to get over the wall and into the city proper instantly, or clear one of the guard towers first, and then use that as a base to observe the rest of the city?" Ranma mused, understanding what Jaune was thinking about. Ranma thought for a few moments, one arm almost lazily slung over Pyrrha's shoulders as she moved into his side, staring up at the wall. "Let's go for the guard tower then."

Jaune led the way back to the tower they'd found, and Ranma stared up at it through his spyglass for a moment, but still couldn't make out anything through the torrential rain. "I know I shouldn't complain, but damn, this rain is annoying." Again he thought for a second, then nodded. "All right. Nora, you're up. Get over here. Jaune your next, then Pyrrha and Ren and finally me."

"I'm sorry, but why that order?" Pyrrha asked in some confusion. Jaune made some sense, given his heavily shield based style, but Nora?

"Because Nora can hit hard, so if she runs into anything, it's in for a world of pain right away. Jaune then can follow up and create enough space up there for the rest of us to follow up on, or rush to maybe guard an inner doorway instead," Ranma said with a shrug. "And your style and Ren's both demand more room to work with."

At that, Pyrrha subsided, and watched as Ranma knelt down, and boosted Nora up into the air effortlessly. She flew higher than the wall, before coming down and landing in the window, whereupon she disappeared from sight, and above, a loud cracking noise could be heard. "Jaune!"

Jaune was already moving, racing at Ranma, and Ranma heaved him upwards with just as much ease as he had Nora, despite the fact that Jaune with his enlarged shield and heavier armor probably weighed twice as much again as Nora. The young Arc nearly flubbed his landing, but rolled as he landed inside into the gatehouse, where he found Nora battering at two large lizard-like Grimm.

Staring at them, Jaune had a bit of trouble recalling what these were for a moment. *Oh, Killer Crocs, that was their name! The evolved form of Snappers.*

Snappers were lizard-like Grimm that were quite common in Anima and Menagerie, almost as common as Creepers were around the world. Killer Crocs were another matter, an evolved form that was very rarely seen, even rarer than a Beowulf Alpha. Normally standing at nine feet tall, they stood on their hind legs, hunched forward's, with large claws on their hands, spikes running along their backs, shoulders and arms, and massive crocodilians heads full of chopping teeth, their Grimm armor dense and covering most of their bodies. They were fast, hard to hurt and adaptable.

The only saving grace, Jaune remembered from the information he had seen of them, was that they were inherently lazy creatures. Once they had set up a home somewhere, they would very rarely leave it.

Their tails, while short, were also extremely powerful, and the Grimm used them with a lot of dexterity. Jaune found this out to his cost as one of those tails crashed into his shield, nearly smashing him back out of the window.

Jaune dug in his feet and then pushed forwards with a yell, his sword stabbing forward into the tail as it retreated. The Arc family blade penetrated the creature's heavy armor there, causing it to hiss in anger, turn and attack. But Jaune again held his ground, his shield up in front of him, taking the blows, his sword flicking up and into the claws and face of the Grimm, as it tried to bite him.

He pressed forward two more steps, and then Pyrrha arrived. She landed lightly on her feet, before leaping up over Jaune in the limited space of the guardroom, bouncing off of the ceiling above to land on top of one of the Killer Crocs. Balancing her feet on its back spikes, she stabbed her javelin from Milo down into the creature's eyes, blinding it, then was off and away, landing in the doorway leading out onto the battlements. The door, which was amazingly still closed with some difficulty, then turned, rolling underneath a strike from the other Killer Croc as he flailed at her.

Nora took the opportunity this distraction afforded her to slam Magnhild into the side of the creature's head. Even without access to electricity, Nora was immensely strong, and the blow cracked the Grimm's armor, sending it stumbling into it fellow.

Behind Jaune, Ren appeared, followed an instant later by Ranma, who grabbed Jaune's shoulder, pushing him forward. "The stairway!" Then Ranma was charging forward, smashing his lance into the chest of one of the Killer Crocs. While Magnhild had cracked the Killer Croc's armor, this blow shattered it, bits of Grimm armor flying everywhere. "Huh, not as tough as a Goliath's armor, good to know."

Obeying, Jaune ducked and rolled forward, his shield creating a bit of a thumping clattering noise against the wood of the floor as he did, but this allowed him to dodge through a series of strikes from the embattled Grimm. He arrived at the top of the stairway leading further down into the tower, just as several Snappers charged up the stairs at them.

Snappers were Creeper-sized Grimm, who could move surprisingly quickly on four legs, but those legs were too short to be used as their primary weapons. That fell to their overlarge jaws. Their barbed teeth were notorious for being heinously hard to pull out of flesh.

They scabbled and bit at his shield, but again, his shield and Jaune stood firm.

With the door leading out onto the wall closed, Pyrrha and Ren both joined Jaune by the stairway, attacking the Grimm as they came up the open stairway. Storm Flower was the only weapon that could fire without the noise of it echoing, and Ren did so now, while Pyrrha stabbed down with her javelin, and then smashed one of the Snappers into his fellow, sending it hurtling back down the stairwell following up quickly.

Ranma helped Nora finish off both of the Killer Crocs quickly, his lance stabbing into one's mouth, and then grabbing the tail of the other one, and holding it still for a second so that

Nora could finish the work on it she'd already had shattered the armor, splattering its head into pieces in a series of strikes.

Then Nora rushed down the stairs after the others, while Ranma headed up, knowing this was only the wall level story of the tower. There would be several other levels above, despite the stairs leading up having been smashed in ancient times. To his surprise however, none of them were occupied and he turned around quickly to join the fight below.

The snappers were far easier to deal with than their evolved brethren were, and none of them took even a single blow. Once they had pushed down sufficiently into the inner tower, Pyrrha leaped out into the next floor's open area, while Jaune again made for the doorway heading out into the city proper.

He stationed himself there to one side, wincing a little at the noise of the battle, but noticing that it really wasn't traveling all that far thanks to the thickness of the tower's walls. He kept an eye out into the city, examining what he could see through the rain, but saw no further movement.

With his shield and lance once more stowed in his weapon space, Ranma joined them there, thumping them on the shoulder in congratulations on a job well done. He also stared out into the city, but he could see a little more than Jaune could even through the rain. "Crap."

"What is it?"

"Spider webs. Lots of spider webs. And from what I remember, Arachnoid webs don't burn like rope right?" Jaune nodded glumly and then gestured upwards at the continuing rain, to which Ranma cursed. "Yeah, I know. Dammit! And Arachnoids are able to feel movement in their webs via vibrations just like real Arachnoids. And their webs are insanely sticky and tough to get out of."

Following Ranma's thoughts, Jaune grimaced too. Spider Grimm like the ones that had been part of the attack on Waypoint were extremely tough to deal with once they set up their spider webs. Those spider webs were strong, durable and quick to wrap around or impede anyone trying to move through them. More permanent versions could also be lined with small flensing spikes. They couldn't penetrate Aura, not right away, but they could tear at clothing, mess up weapons and worse.

Behind them, the others had quickly moved back up to the doorway leading out to the wall just in case, but it seemed as if they had gotten into the city with none of the other Grimm in the area having heard the commotion over the rain. Once they were clear that no Grimm wasn't going to try and attack them from behind, the rest of team JNPR joined Ranma and Jaune by the doorway, staring out into the rain-soaked city.

"And I was just getting used to not feeling wet shit hit me from the sky. I don't see any movement so do Grimm not like rain either?" Nora asked.

"Depends on the type," Ranma answered tartly, remembering his time in the Grimm Lands. "Boarbatustks quite like the rain because it makes mud, and they love that stuff. Certain lizard types do, snake Grimm, a few others. Arachnoids no, not any types I've ever seen. And most Arachnoid types would also be hold up in some small - for their size anyway - hiding places, waiting for anything to interfere with their webbing. They're normally ambush hunters unless part of a larger horde."

Pyrrha frowned, also staring through the rain. "Will spider Grimm come to one another's aid? I can't remember. If not, we can maybe clear each building as we go. But if they do, as they discover our presence we'll have a large-scale fight on our hands."

"I'm going to go back up and then out onto the wall. If I can jump over on to the rooftops over there," Ranma pointed, "we can see if the webbing continues up top or just at street level."

The others all nodded, with Pyrrha following Ranma back into the tower. The two of them spent a few seconds kissing, before she retraced Ranma's earlier footsteps higher into the tower, taking place at one of the arrow slits that pointed back into the city. There Pyrrha used the sniper scope on her rifle and peered out into the city, looking for any movement she could see.

However, through the rain and darkness, that was not easy. Pyrrha thought she saw something in the distance, but that was all. She could barely make out Ranma as he leaped out from the outer battlements down on into the city, landing on a roof.

For his part, Ranma landed lightly, then looked around him, before heading to the next building over, being careful to watch his footing. Not because he was afraid, he would slip, even in the rain or night Ranma was pretty surefooted, thanks to the training his father had given him before he came to Remnant. Although Ranma still disliked giving the man any props for anything else, when it came to martial arts the man knew his stuff.

Rather, Ranma was concerned about the noise he could be making on these very old roofs. It had been centuries after all since this city fell. Thankfully, most of the construction had been made out of stone, including the roofs, so the city still looked pretty much like it had in the past.

As he moved deeper into the city, Ranma saw more evidence of the Grimm's assault on it. A building here had been smashed almost completely flat. A wall here had been punctured almost as if a needle thrust through the wood, while another one, stone, had been shattered in several places. Moreover, in one area of the city, several buildings had been smashed flat, as if a very large Grimm had smashed its way into the city and rampaged in that one specific area.

A Hydra maybe? Whatever it is, it isn't around any longer. While large Grimm would have answered the call of the negative emotions from the civilians under attack, they would normally return to their stomping grounds afterward.

He did however see several signs of movement within buildings occasionally. The rain was keeping all of the Grimm at home, and seeing that, Ranma decided on what they would do.

Returning to the others rather than continue surveying the city, Ranma spent another few seconds making out with Pyrrha before returning to the rest of the group down below. They had broken out some of the hard tack, and Pyrrha and Ranma joined them in munching on the small smack, before he and Ren retreated upstairs for a moment to empty their bladders. *Aura or no, getting hit in the stomach when you had a full bladder was not fun.*

Once that was done, they moved out into the city slowly, the rain and night giving them more cover than their cloaks or anything else still. But in the distance, Ranma could see the first creeping signs of dawn through the rain.

There, Ranma used some of the fire dust that Pyrrha and Ren used in their weapons to light a fire on the webbing. It didn't spread very far, the webbing more melting than burning, but that was fine. The damage to the webbing it did would hopefully be enough.

Almost instantly, Arachnoids swarmed out of the five buildings lining the road in front of the tower, chittering in hunger. Several dozen of them charged from all direction, pulled out of the buildings by the damage to their webbing.

"Ren, stay hidden out here, make certain that none of them retreat. We can't afford to let them warn the rest of the Grimm here. The rest of us push hard on the left flank, head to that building there!" Ranma ordered.

With the downpour continuing to muffle the noise, Pyrrha was able to use her rifle along with Ranma's at this point, and they splattered the Arachnoids charging at them before Nora and Jaune charged in turn at one portion of the Arachnoids. Ranma soon joined Jaune taking the lead as Nora fell back, smashing and slicing the Arachnoids into ribbons until Jaune smashed shoulder first into one spider Grimm just as it came out of the doorway. He was then inside, followed quickly by Ranma.

Pyrrha followed them, with Nora last, as the carpet of Arachnoids came after them, bunching up in the doorway. Nora had a field day smashing them while Jaune held them at bay, the pink-haired girl launching attacks over the top of Jaune's shield or around the edge. Meanwhile, Ranma and Pyrrha cleared the rest of the room they had entered, which had been full of other Arachnoids.

Soon, the Arachnoids came in through one of the windows, and Pyrrha moved to block them, while outside, the horde of Arachnoids continued to pour out of the other buildings

while Ren watched on, shaking his head at how many of them had been around. It was extremely bloody business, or it would have been if the Grimm were the type of enemy who left bodies in blood behind... Ren was fascinated to see no sign of the larger variants and wondered where they would be held up. *The sheer number of the smaller types is worrisome though.*

Inside the building, Ranma had finished clearing up the first floor, and had ascended into the second. There he found the answer to Ren's question. Two large spider-like Grimm were rousing themselves from their spider webs as they moved towards the stairs leading down, their movements sluggish. *Right, large Grimm can enter a kind of hibernation when there's no food around. Guess ambush types like Tarantkillas would make more use of that than others.*

Ranma's lance embedded itself in the face of one of them for even realize he was there, then he was charging into the stabbing feet of the other Grimm, a punch fit to shatter stone landing on the Arachnoid-equivalent of a jaw, hurling it up into the ceiling.

When he was done, he stood there for a moment, staring around him, then breathing a sigh of relief, moved to join the others down below. There, Ran had joined the battle, coming in behind the Grimm, taking them completely by surprise as Jaune and Pyrrha retreated deeper into the building to let them enter.

Caught between all of the members of team JNPR, the spider Grimm didn't stand much of a chance, and the fight was soon over.

"It looks as if the larger Grimm are also hiding from the weather or hibernating. That's good, because very few of them can fight us inside as well as their smaller brethren can. This worked guys, we're going to keep doing it as we move deeper in."

The others all nodded, although Jaune frowned a little. "We're going to need to take breaks between battles like that. There are so many Grimm here! We killed... a hundred and twenty or so of the small type just now..."

"More like three hundred or so," Ren interjected, shaking his head. "I started counting when you all retreated into this building and reached at least that many. Not including the Grimm you killed outside."

"My point is, we're all going to get tired eventually," Jaune continued.

"Good point." Ranma paused for a moment, then looked over to Nora. "Nora... How good are you with explosives?"

The beaming grin she wore for a moment could have been used to power a lighthouse for a few years.

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Raven Branwen was quietly furious about how this mission had suddenly gone to shit. First, her quarry the Azure Warden they had been paid so exorbitantly to assassinate, had somehow been able to move through the Grimm Lands just as well as her own folk could. They were silent, not loud, blending into the environment in a way that very few Hunters could despite their label. Most Hunters were loud, brash, blunt objects. *Just like Tai, the lot of them. But this group somehow have acclimated to the real world beyond the static, imaginary borders of Vale and the rest of them in a way he never could.*

More than that, The Warden and his team had taken and ambushed her own folk, while she was gone and done so easily. That left a bad taste in Raven's mouth, and she wasn't certain she was more angry with: the Hunters who had pulled off the ambush, or her own people for being so weak! To the Branwen clan, there was nothing worse than weakness. *And now the fools even lost their trail! Blast it, the old saying about if you need something done right, do it yourself is still true. But this weakness cannot go unanswered. I will force the whole blasted clan into a training regimen after this that has their limbs bled white!*

Thankfully for her, Raven had long ago created a portal to Sparta. The city had at one point been very rich, and she had been curious to explore, although the Grimm had been numerous enough to make her cut that exploration short. Since then, she had used the portal twice to trick people who tried to follow her through one of her portal into the Grimm infested city.

Now, looking around the city, Raven reflected on weakness, and her own child, Yang. It was coming time for when she would want to meet the girl. Hopefully Yang would prove strong enough to join the tribe. If not, well it wasn't as if Raven had any emotional connection to the girl. *Such a thing can wait until I have seen if she is strong enough to survive. If she is, then I will welcome her with open arms, I will tell her the truth of Ozpin and our world. And she will come to understand that only the tribe matters, that only strength matters. Everyone else is simply obstacles or prey. Survival is all. Everything else but the strength needed to do so is useless frippery at best, weakness at worst.*

Her thoughts were interrupted by an explosion, a dull whump, the noise deadened by the sound of the rain and the walls of the city. Turning in that direction quickly, Raven crouched, the rain and her cloak hiding her almost entirely from view despite the fact that the sun was now in the sky above, the day horrendously overcast with rain.

The explosion was barely visible from where she was hiding, and Raven stared as a building collapsed in on itself. Another followed, and then a third, and then Grimm around her were boiling out of their buildings, staring around them in some confusion. The echoes of the explosions were throwing them off, but they knew that they were not alone any longer.

Raven carefully surveyed the whole city, noting that the sound wasn't carrying as far as she had thought. The areas around the explosion were certainly worked up, up to where she was hiding, and a few of the spider-type Grimm were moving around her now. But for the most part, the Arachnoids were still staying undercover thanks to the rain. However, she did notice a few other types of Grimm. Lots of snappers were now moving around, heading towards the distant explosions. There were also a few groups of Grimm who weren't moving, but were out in the open at the moment, and Raven hissed as she saw one group closer to the explosions but not moving towards them. *Where did those things come from!?*

The Grimm in question were called Apathy. Moreover, that was precisely what they created. The humanoid Grimm emitted an aura around them, almost like an S-class's Grimm's, except in their case it wasn't fear they produced, of but apathy, disinterest, laziness. If a human was within their area of influence for too long, they literally began to suck the energy out of them. Indeed, the same happened to other Grimm, hence Raven's surprise they were within the city.

Raven had seen it happen, had seen these creatures drain the life force out of people, so much so that they lacked the energy to run away, let alone fight back. They weren't very dangerous otherwise, only being about as strong as a normal Beowulf, but the apathetic feelings they emitted made them extremely dangerous.

Shaking her head, she decided to stay where she was. There was no point in getting involved, and far too many Grimm about for her to bother with.

Besides, this will let me observe how well this Azure Warden fights. And, if they are in the area of those explosions still, they're are going to run into that one pack of Apathy soon. So long as I can get some proof of his demise, I don't care if the Grimm kill him or I do.

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"HAhahhahahaha, burn! Burn!" Nora shouted, watching their experiment worked to a T.

With the others hidden nearby, Nora and Ranma had moved out into the city, taking to the rooftops and setting up small explosives on the rooftops, collapsing them inward and crushing the Grimm inside. Only a few times did this actually work to destroy the majority of the spider-like Grimm within the buildings they worked on, but it did work to destroy the upper segments every time, slaying the larger, more troublesome Grimm who seemingly always took over the upper floors.

Below, nearly a thousand Arachnoids milled, trying to figure out what it happened, but the rain and the visibility problem with it continued even now with the sun in the sky. Arachnoids didn't have enough sense of smell to punch through the rain, and even with their eight eyes, they didn't seem to look up often.

As they watched, the spotted Jaune, or a few of them did anyway, and the Arachnoids chittered in spider fury before racing towards Jaune. This alerted the rest of the horde. Jaune retreated deeper into the building he Ren and Pyrrha had been hiding in, heading up to the second floor.

Ranma could picture in his mind what was going on now, as he watched the Grimm began to climb all over the building, covering it like some unholy living carpet, able to only get a few of their fellows in to attack the Hunters within at a time. Pyrrha and Ren would be holding the windows, zipping between them maybe, because there were several of them. Jaune would be standing by the stairs, holding the Grimm at bay there.

He and Nora watched for a few moments, moving around the area via the rooftops, hoping that the violence and the noise from the explosions hadn't spread too far. They saw few groups of Grimm out and looking around warily now, but after about a block in every direction from the explosions, none of the Grimm were actually moving towards them or the ongoing battle.

"It worked," Ranma mused, before frowning, as a feeling of lethargy and tiredness hit him.

Beside him, Nora stumbled, yawned, and sat down on the rooftop, shaking her head groggily. "That's good then. Doesn't that mean we can take a nap here? I'm a little tired all of a sudden. Need... more... pancakes..."

Ranma understood instantly that this feeling wasn't natural and began to look around for a cause even as he started to force his ki through his body to a greater degree, trying to fight the feeling. He looked around quickly and noticed a group of Grimm directly below them. They were humanoid creatures, extremely thin and tall, with Grimm masks that looked almost deformed in comparison to the majority, their mouths invisible in a splash of red Grimm flame much like a normal Grimm's eyes.

They were looking around themselves, but making no move to head towards the explosions, and weren't looking up at the rooftops either. Yet Ranma knew that neither they nor someone inside the building was the reason behind the sudden feelings of tiredness hitting him and Nora.

With an effort of will, Ranma grabbed Nora up, pulling her into his arms as he began to move away from the Grimm. Despite his ki reserves letting Ranma move his body, Ranma's barely had enough willpower to force himself to leap over to the next building. But when he landed, Nora shifted in his arms instantly, her eyes popping open wide from where they had been falling asleep. "What the, what the heck happened!? Ugh, I feel like I've gone whole days without pancakes or naps."

"Keep your voice down!" Ranma hissed, clamping an arm over Nora's mouth. "I think we just ran into a group of Grimm that can somehow suck out our willpower. Not Aura, I don't think, but our physical energy and willpower. Scary."

Nodding, and Nora waited until Ranma released her, then hopped to her feet, staring back the way they'd come, but unable to make out anything through the intervening building and the rain still coming down in buckets. "What the heck did they look like?"

"Tall humanoids, really thin, weird masks. Honestly, I don't know if they'd be any danger in a real fight, but if we can't get within half a city block of them, we'll have to take them out at range. If even I could feel that wave of tiredness, and it put you to sleep, none of us will be able to fight them close up."

"Ren might be able to, his Semblance could maybe cancel theirs. Although it isn't something I'd like to really play around with," Nora admitted. "Are we done the sweep now?"

Ranma nodded and gestured them straight back to the battle going on.

By this point, the carpet of Arachnoids covering the building had diminished somewhat, but there were still several hundred of them, and Ranma charged forwards, leaping onto the roof and coming down on top of several of them, crushing them under his feet, before laying out with his lance and shield.

Mindful of the need to not damage the building with her teammates inside, Nora laid down a single grenade into a mass of Grimm scuffling around the doorway into the building, then charged down into them, Magnhild shifting from its grenade launcher form into her hammer as she leaped forward. Her landing smashed several Arachnoids, and her hammer swept out in its polearm form, crushing more before she raced into the building from below. "Rennie, have no fear, your savior is here!"

On top of the roof, the Arachnoids had all rallied, and were now pressing Ranma in from all sides, but he was simply far too mobile for them. The spider Grimm were also not very durable. Every blow from his lance, either stab or strike, smashed one of them into paste, and his kicks did the same.

Inside the building, Jaune Pyrrha and Ren had been hard-pressed, but now, as more of the Arachnoids broke off to fight Ranma and Nora, they quickly began to gain the upper hand. Soon, the last of the Arachnoids were dead on the roof, and Ranma flipped himself down and through one of the windows, stabbing into an Arachnoid there, and joining the battle inside. Once more, between the five of them they were able to put down the Arachnoids with relative ease at that point.

But it was obvious that the fight leading up to it had been quite hard. Ren was leaning tiredly against the wall, ringing out his hands one after another. Pyrrha was grimacing down at

few dents in her armor, with Jaune doing the same, only looking more energetic than the redhead about things.

He spoke up for the other three, gesturing to where Nora was already moving over to help Ren, putting an arm around her boyfriend. "That was tough. Really, really tough. If we try that tactic again, I think you need to be in here with us, Ranma."

Ranma looked over at Nora, then shook his head. "I honestly don't think Nora knows enough about architecture to know where to place her grenades. I can be the one to act as the bait though, while Nora goes on patrol. But..."

From there, Ranma explained their run in with the tall humanoid like Grimm, which caught everyone's attention, and Jaune wasn't the only one who shivered a little at the idea of a Grimm being able to just suck out or negate their energy somehow. "Right, we'll be staying well the hell away from them. Killing them at range is the only way to go. Pyrrha?"

Pyrrha grimaced. "I can perhaps shoot about six hundred feet in this rain maybe, that's about a block in Mistral. I would be more than happy to try, but it depends on how lively these Grimm are to attack us. If I start killing them at range, will they charge and bring that apathy field with them?"

"The rest of us will be on standby then," Ranma ordered. "Five minutes rest people, get a few bites of jerky into you if nothing else. Then we're going again. It might not look like it in this damn rain, and the day is wasting."

Thankfully, it turned out that killing the Apathy at range was relatively easy. The Grimm themselves didn't move very quickly and didn't seem to notice what was going on until six of their brethren were down, shot in the head or stomach by Pyrrha's high-powered rifle. However, the noise of that brought in dozens of the Snappers, and for the first time since entering the city, Ranma and the group were forced to retreat when Arachnoids quickly began to join in from all sides.

Ranma grimaced. With their speed and climbing skills, the Arachnoids almost negated their ability to take to the rooftops, although it did flummox the snappers. Their spider webs were also starting to bother Ren and Nora, while also occasionally slowing the group down. Before this, the spider webs had only slowed them down a bit, but this deep in the city the majority came with the tiny, incredibly sharp thorns built into them somehow. All of their clothing was starting to get ragged quickly, and more than once a trike missed its target as the spider web tugged at their limbs.

But worse, the Tarantkillas were now joining in. Dozens of them, then more began to boil out of the buildings all around them.

"Retreat back to the buildings we already destroyed," Ranma ordered. "Nora, run back! See if you can set up some more explosives. Bring down more of the buildings."

"Don't do it randomly," Jaune suddenly shouted, adding his own thoughts into Ranma's plan. "Create a fire break, an open area the Grimm will have to come at us over! That'll let us use our guns more and stop us from getting more tangled up in their damn webs!"

"I don't see why you're complaining!" Ren grunted as he found his arm getting caught in a bit of webbing. He was holding position in what must have been a private garden, but the whole place was lousy with webs, and he could barely move faster than the Arachnoids. His clothing was also getting torn apart by it. "You're Aura's strong enough you aren't bothered by the blasted thorns. How in the world do they create those, anyway?"

"Science later, killing now," Pyrrha laughed, her rifle changing into its xiphos form, which she stabbed behind her into an Arachnid. She then leaped up over a Snapper, which she used as a jump off point to stab Milo's javelin form into the chest of a Tarantkilla as it tried to bite her.

"Yes, dear," Ranma quipped, causing Pyrrha to giggle like a schoolgirl even as they both continued to reap a toll of Grimm.

Snorting at this, Nora finished splattering a Snapper into paste before turning, racing away. "Good luck guys!"

Moments later, Ren was back up onto one of the rooftops, giving cover fire. The Tarantkillas tried to swarm up after him and the others, but while they could climb, they weren't as fast as the Hunters were. The foursome fought a slow retreat, leaping away from the buildings to land on the other nearby neighbors whenever they were in danger of being completely encircled by the spider Grimm, killing as many of them as they could as they went. The Snappers though continued to follow along on the roads below, unable to take part in the fight yet, but still following, joined by a handful of Killer Crocs.

Behind them, Nora knocked down several buildings, using her hammer to do some of it, and explosives to demolish one building in particular. This created a long corridor of rubble as Jaune had asked for, which the Grimm would have to cross.

When he heard the explosions, Ranma ordered them all to break off quickly, and thanks to their ability to leap from building to building, even Jaune, slowed down by his armor as he was could were able to break contact quickly enough.

The Grimm, Snappers, Arachnoids and Tarantkillas rushed after them, but by the time they hit the open area within the city that Nora had created, the Hunters were ready, Ranma idly noted that she had found the segment of the city, which had already been shattered by

some large Grimm. This meant they had a larger clear zone to play with, and could even retreat out of the city through the hole in the outer wall easily.

Jaune and Ranma put themselves forward of the others, holding position. The others had spread out, and now the Grimm boiled out of the rest of the ruined city towards them. "Nora, pound them!"

"Yehaw!" With that, Nora began liberally firing grenades into the incoming horde. Pyrrha started to snipe at the Tarantkillas, while Ren moved from side to side, aiming to the sides of the horde advancing on them, keeping them more concentrated in the center. There, Ranma charged forward like a battering ram, hurling Grimm left and right, while Jaune stolidly stood in place, daring them to come at him. Soon, Ranma was also using ki attacks, blasting through the Grimm as if they were made of paper

Behind him, Pyrrha scowled, and began to reach out with her polarity senses, even as she kept firing. *There has to be something I can use here...*

OOOOOO

At around the same time that Ranma and the others were planning to attack the Apathy pack, Cinder and the rest of the Hunters assigned to clear out Sparta were in the air, heading towards the distant target. With the rain cutting down the visibility so much, the trip was quite slow, despite the powerful bullheads they were using. This allowed the reporters, who were, unfortunately along with them, to go to each of the Hunters and Huntresses and try to interview them.

Having them try this gunk before a major battle went about as well as you could expect. Some of the Hunters were all for it, others were extremely dismissive, and even abrupt and angry with them.

Cinder tried, she tried **hard** not to lash out at them but she was feeling a little anxious herself. Now, not anxious. She was feeling excited. Fighting Grimm wasn't something she had been called upon to do over much in the past thanks to her relationship with Salem. But she had trained against them, but after the past few years with Salem, the Grimm still stabbed a button deep in her brain marked 'other', just as much as they did for any other human. And releasing her... anxiousness on them given some choices she would have to make soon seemed like a magnificent idea. *The moment is coming, all too quickly. I... I have to be ready, ready to cross that Rubicon, or forever turn away...*

The rain finally petered out just as the pilots reported seeing the city in the distance, and moments later, they were above it, seeing the violence occurring at one point, the Grimm boiling everywhere towards the sound of violence as it began to be the only noise heard throughout the city.

Seeing that, Cinder smiled and she and the other Hunters in the bullhead with her pulled on their headsets. A moment later, she was giving out orders crisply, barely waiting for them to be acknowledged before going on. "Well, gentlemen, ladies, I think our forward team has done their job. The Grimm are out of the houses, and in the open. Drop by teams. Team HRST, Team THNDR, I'll want you to drop behind team JNPR and give them some aid, you're first. Remember to bring some headsets down with you. Team ARTC, your next, left flank, with command of teams JMMR, GRNR, WHITE and LBRS. Team REY, right flank, command of LKBR, VILT, DCBL and OLVE. Team BRZ, with team SMRS down the middle. The rest, remain on standby until I call you, then take position on the outer walls."

As the gaping reporters watched, team HRST and THNDR, two of the more heavily armed teams, leaped out of the bullhead to one side of the bullhead that Cinder and her team were on. They dropped straight down into the city, landing in the open zone and instantly several of the two teams, armed with what amounted to different types of machine guns, opened fire on the Grimm facing team JNPR and Ranma. The other, mostly spear wielders and a single sword wielder, charged forward, joining the front of the battle line with Ranma and Jaune, along with Pyrrha who had left her sniper position to do the same.

"Wait, wait, you're... are you, are you all dropping down like that! What about us?" The senior reported of the six-man group asked, his tone nearly shrill and querulous. His face also looked utterly terrified as he looked down into the teeming black and white mass below.

"Oh I'm sorry," Cinder (in her alias of Sabrina) snorted, letting some of her inner snark out, feeling the rush of battle starting to fill her. It wasn't something she normally enjoyed, but after all the mental maneuverings, the need to keep a tight rein on her emotions lest her inner, inner thoughts be spotted by her patroness, Cinder's control needed an outlet. "This is how Hunters land. At no point during the discussion for this mission was it ever discussed actually landing, so that you civilians could get off. Especially before the city's been cleared. Stay up here, and record what you can get. You'll get your chance to interview the Invincible Girl and her team later."

Giving them no further thought, Cinder stood up from where she had been sitting, her legs crossed languidly in front of her even as she gave out orders, unhooking herself and standing in the opening of the Bullhead. Emerald and Mercury joined her quickly, with Neo moving up from the back of the bullhead as Cinder raised her hands.

Fire began to envelop her arms, and then, she gestured down, creating a fireball, which she launched down into the horde below. It incinerated several dozen but the horde kept coming. Which was fine by Cinder.

"Bring the **pain!**" Cinder shrieked, startling Mercury and Emerald.

Neo, on the other hand, watched her with something like amusement. *Oh dear, Miss high and mighty is losing it, how glorious. I wonder which way Humpty Dumpty on her wall is going to fall?*

She watched as Cinder leaped out and down towards the Grimm, her double-bladed weapons coming off of her back and into her hands as she lashed out at the first Tarantkillas, cutting into its head and side, before landing on top of one of the Snappers, snapping its back. Then Neo and the other two followed on her heels with BRZ following up afterward.

Once on the ground, Cinder lashed out again with her purloined powers, fireballs flashing out in every direction, as her weapons, heated by her hands burned through Grimm armor and flesh alike as if they were made of paper. Behind her, Mercury, Neo and Emerald landed, each of them just as deadly as a normal Hunter would have been in the same situation, while team BRZ followed quickly. In her current guise, Neo used two short rapiers, the same size as her normal weapon, but not quite as dangerous.

"Yes!" Cinder practically hissed, her thoughts coalescing. *No more thinking, no more needing to plan and protect my future with every thought, no more trying to discern which way to go, no more fear of Salem here. Just violence, **glorious violence!***

With the whole city being full of Grimm, there were thousands upon thousands of Grimm, Snappers and Arachnoids, mostly coming at the Hunters from nearly every direction. Even with the reinforcements, that was a tall order, especially given the fact that with this many Grimm around, they created something of the same fear inducing feeling that S-class Grimm could do on their own.

But Ranma, knowing that his own team were getting extremely tired by this point, decided to break out one of his trump cards. "Thus I say raise your head, for spring has come, and spring is the hope of man!"

With that verbal command guiding his thoughts, Ranma once more released his control of the Semblance that Spring had gifted him. He glowed blue from head to toe for a moment, as a feeling of wellness, strength and determination filled every human within the city. Even those above were affected, and the cameramen watched on in awe as Ranma, Pyrrha and their two new companions pushed into the Grimm, who suddenly were retreating ahead of him.

Cinder, Emerald, Neo, Mercury and the other Hunter team met them in the middle of the horde. The group of Hunters merging into one group, as they dodged, fired, and slaughtered the Grimm all around them. As she did though, Cinder stumbled, nearly falling to one knee.

This had nothing to do with a group of Apathy nearby, who were already being taken under fire by team HRST, although one or two of the other Hunters and also stumbled slightly despite the feeling Ranma's aura invoked in all of them now. This covered her for a moment,

but Cinder knew what had really occurred just then, she could feel it inside her, inside her spine!

The Grimm embedded in her neck, the Grimm that had gifted her a portion of the fall maiden's power had just become extremely sluggish for a moment. Its feelers had retreated as if the bug was trying to curl in on itself but it couldn't.

Why it was doing so, Cinder didn't know, but nor did she care. Now, without even thinking about it, Cinder reached behind her and gripped the Grimm's tiny form under her shirt, pulling it out of the back of her neck.

The Grimm should have torn its way out instead of simply be pulled out like a needle, its spindles acting like so many spiked daggers stuck in her body, regardless of their size. Instead, because it so sluggish, it did nothing, simply laying in her hand for a moment, curling around itself.

Is this the power of the Spring Maiden? A subtle power, but one that weakens and disorients Grimm even as it strengthens people?

Cinder stared at it for a moment, and then, hesitantly raised her hand, as Emerald and Mercury gave her some cover fire, glaring down at her hand. Neo didn't. Instead, she was staring at the small Grimm in Cinder's hand, and then at her, fear, shock and confusion going through the silent killer for a moment.

Cinder's original Semblance, Scorching Caress, should have simply heating her hand enough to be painful for anyone else to touch, even hot enough to mold glass or Dust. But now she watched as her hand exploded once more into fire, hotter and more powerful than before.

A wicked grin crossed her features before Cinder began to laugh quietly amidst the battle all around her. *And so the die is cast! Goodbye, Salem! This Queen has now become a player!* With that, she called upon her Semblance in both hands. The little parasite Grimm in her hand burned to ash within seconds, and Cinder watched as the ash disappeared.

When it was gone, Cinder roared as she stood up, holding her hands above her head, then gesturing forward, launching the fireball she had just created into a group of Grimm ahead of her, trying to overwhelm two of the other Hunters. Both of them flinched as the fireball flew over their heads, then stared as it seared straight down the road, crisping hundreds of Grimm at a time.

"Slaughter them all! The city was once humanities and will be again when this day is through. Show the Grimm this is not their planet, it is ours. Remnant belongs to us, to you and me!" she shouted, a somewhat prepared speech that Cinder had thought of beforehand. *But it will do for now. And when these Hunters and those after us start to look to me for leadership, so too will go their loyalty. And with that, my power base will further coalesce.*

Watching this, Neo had to nod at the theater of it all. *Ah... now I understand. She is going to make herself a power. Huh... it might actually work. But that, that Grimm thing in her hand. It was just like the one we used to kill Adam Taurus, only... different in what it did. FUCK, what was Cinder caught up in? Was she willing, or just passing on her own shit down onto Roman and me? Ugh... she's still a bitch, but...*

Ranma and the others, caught up in Ranma's semblance, answered with a roar as the Grimm began to try to retreat. But there would be no retreat for the Grimm inside the city this day, and Cinder began to bark out further orders as she leaped up onto a building giving her a somewhat birds-eye view of the battle, lashing out and down with her fire semblance as if they were mortar rounds going off in the surrounding horde. With that and Ranma's Semblance going for them, the battle was no longer in any doubt.

At least not to the Hunters and Huntresses involved anyway.

Above the fight, one of the reporters turned to his cameramen, his eyes wide. "Keep one camera on that woman! Sabrina, right? FUCK, why haven't we ever heard of her before this!? She's, she's like an adult version of a.. a..."

One of the other men was staring through his camera, a blush on his face. "An Alter-Invincible Girl? Like, one that er, is seductive and sexy instead of innocent and cute but can command a room to the same degree?"

"...Yeah, that'll do. I want one camera on her, one on the Invincible Girl, fuck that red hair in this light is damn amazing! The others, I want panning around! We are seeing history in the making just like we were told we would!" the chief reporter ordered.

OOOOOOO

Elsewhere in the city, Raven stared hard at Ranma, wondering where she had seen a power like that before. *I know that power from somewhere, but where?* Try as she might, Raven couldn't quite bring it to mind. Regardless, it was very evident to her that Reinhart had not told them everything about their target.

Regardless, with more Hunters arriving, it's very clear the rest of his information on what is happening here was spot on. Mistral is making a determined push to retake Sparta. Why that was, Raven didn't know. But it was very clearly true. Still, if they think that's going to be easy, they are very wrong. More Grimm will descend on the city eventually, or Salem will become aware of this, feel affronted and send them here purposefully.

The thought of Salem brought a shiver to Raven's back, before she decided to retreat for the moment, ironically heading for the same tower that Ranma and the others had used as their entry point into the city. *I will stay hidden for now, bring in the rest of my folk. Perhaps in*

the peaceful moments after this battle is over, I'll have a chance to target the Azure Warden specifically. I made an agreement and I mean to see it through.

OOOOOOO

Outside the city, Salem was already reacting. She had begun moving Grimm towards Sparta well before this, waiting on the opportunity to come. Now, as she felt her servants within the city dying in droves, the Grimm horde that she had gathered in several of the nearby valleys began to move, so numerous they covered the ground in black and white. Amongst them, Tyrian laughed wildly as they moved, seeing this as a sign of his Mistress's power. "Yes, yes, together my comrades together! We will crush them, we will present this Azure Warden's head to our mistress, to my queen, my queen! All I do, all the blood, killings, all for you!"

Elsewhere, Hazel also waited. He preferred not to work directly with the Grimm but was close enough to the city, his bullhead hidden under a tarpaulin that he could move into the city quickly enough once Tyrian and the Grimm began their assault. Wherever their target moved, one or the other would find him. *And then, Ozpin, when your newest pawn is slain, it will be time to move against you!* He thought, as the battle within the city continued.

End Episode 8, Chapter 23

Since the next episode is going to be almost non-stop combat, I think this is a good place to end the episode. Hope you enjoyed the glorious Ranma-style anti-Grimm violence, and I will see you next time.