

### S.O.H, Episode 3, Chapter 20, part 1

Despite Ranma's concerns about Achilles, or worse, the media trying to follow them back to Thetis' place, they were able to exit the party with a minimum of fuss. As they got into the bullhead they'd been given for the night, Ren noticed Ranma looking to the side for a moment, so quick that even Ren barely spotted it from where he was about to take the driver's seat. He was the only one of them who could drive a bullhead. The faint frown on Ranma's face afterward made Ren ask, "Is there something wrong?"

"Don't think so," Ranma muttered, his lips twisting wryly. "Nothing that you need to worry about anyway." The bullhead began to ascend into the air, heading back to Thetis's place, and he became serious, nodding over at Jaune. "Instead, you all should hear about the mission your team was chosen for and why."

"You mean besides my public persona?" Pyrrha quipped, although there was nothing humorous about her tone or face at the moment.

"Oh, that was a big deal too. Although the Mistral Council might have asked for me in person, too, if they had any sense. But I get the impression they don't have much sense at all. Or think that bigger hammer-type BS and public relations can trump reality." From there, Ranma and Jaune told the others the mission that they had been given.

Listening to the objective of this massive plan, Pyrrha whistled. "That is going to take a lot of manpower. None of you have really seen a map of Mistral, but this is the kind of thing that could absorb almost all of our hunters."

"That was pointed out during the meeting," Jaune nodded. "I think that they are right though, if we can prepare the ground appropriately, we can make it into a defensive battle. The kind of battle where we would be able to dictate terms and have a lot of advantages."

"Yeah, but they were glossing over getting there way too much. Never mind the whole 'wanting to use Pyrrha as a poster child' thing to drum up public support thing," Ranma began, before being interrupted.

But such was the heartfelt nature of the "UGGH" Pyrrha let out while rolling her head back in her chair. Ranma couldn't begrudge her. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I didn't like hearing it when you brought it up back in Beacon, and I don't like hearing it now." She shook her head, then looked at him with hope shining in her emerald eyes. "But you said you were able to talk them out of it?"

"I talked them out of having us be followed around by a camera crew, yeah. You'll need to do an interview afterward, though."

"After? I thought they wanted us all to do interviews tomorrow," Jaune protested.

“Yeah, that’s what they said, but ya mighta noticed I didn’t say anything about that. I think if we can get out of here fast enough, we can avoid that for now,” Ranma answered with a smirk.

At that, Pyrrha was torn between giggling at the thought of just leaving like that to get out of once more being put on display and a bit of unease at how easily Ranma was willing to play fast and loose with the law. Yet the idea of getting out of being forced to put on her Invincible Girl persona once more was too good to be annoyed by that.

With that in mind, Pyrrha leaned over and kissed him on the cheek, shivering with delight as Ranma put an arm around her shoulder, pulling her into his side. These little touches meant a great deal to her. “I have to thank you for that and your help tonight. I backslid horribly, didn’t I?”

Ranma shrugged. “Don’t worry, it was almost inevitable that you’d have moments like that. But so long as you can keep them short, and me and Nora are around to remind you to work on your ‘screw the world’ personality, you’ll be fine.”

“I, wh, what personality!?” Pyrrha sputtered.

Jaune and Ren chuckled while Nora cackled like a madwoman. “That’s right! Why should other people’s opinions matter? It’s all on us! That’s all that matters.”

“I’m not certain that I completely agree,” Pyrrha began tactfully before flinching as Ranma began to tickle her with his offhand while pulling her into an even tighter hug with his other arm. “Repeat after me,” he said, his arm around her shoulder now dropping down and clamping her arms against her side and his. “Screw the world.”

Pouting, Pyrrha looked away and then Nora began to tickle her from behind.

Even Jaune got into it. Seeing how fake Pyrrha’s smile and expression had been earlier that night was an eyeopener for him. “Say it, I’m going to join in. And I have seven sisters. I know precisely where to tickle for maximum effect.”

Blushing furiously, Pyrrha pouted but obeyed. “S, s, screw the world.”

“There was that so harDooooF?!” Ranma oofed as Pyrrha elbowed him hard in the stomach the instant she was freed, huffing and moving away from him in embarrassment.

From where he was flying the bullhead, Ren sensed that his friends might have taken their teasing a bit too far and decided to change the subject. “But surely the PR aspect is not all you were objecting to about this plan of the Council. I would think that you had some ideas about the planning of the entire campaign from how you mentioned the whole ‘bigger hammer thing’.”

“Bah! There is no such thing as a bigger hammer! There’s only dead and not dead enough,” Nora scoffed.

Looking at her, Ranma sighed. “Yeah, and that right there illustrates both the kind of thinking this plan is based on and maybe why they haven’t thought about a subtler approach.”

Jaune got it at once, showing the tactical mind he had developed as the team leader. “The classes you were teaching about moving in the wilds. You think that we could go for... what? Sneaking into the area, I get. But doing what?”

“Hunting specific smart Grimm, S-class or whatever,” Ranma answered instantly. “Kill the leaders of the Grimm before they know we’re there, deprive the monsters with their ability to organize, and whoever is behind them of her local commanders.”

Nora gulped, reaching over to grab at Ren’s arm, despite the fact he was using both hands to fly at present. Of the group that Ranma had shared that idea of someone directing the Grimm with, she had reacted the poorest. Not that she disbelieved him, but she understood the implications, as did Ren, very intimately. But Ren, with the self-control that Ranma had recently learned came with his Semblance, could control it far better than Nora.

“But you don’t think it’s a viable idea any longer?” Jaune asked.

“Yeah, well... I know I could do it. But what would you all think about me leaving you four behind to head in on my own while you and the other Hunter teams come in...?”

Ranma did not get to finish his thought before Pyrrha had reached over and grabbed his arm. “I’m sorry, but no!”

“Yeah, that’s about what I thought. But a few months of classes isn’t enough to make you all good enough to keep up with me.”

Jaune was silent, frowning as he thought, his mind ticking over for a bit not just with Ranma’s suggestion but what they had been told about the objective, about the city of Spartoi, and the fact bandits were operating out there. “We... we do need more information about the lay of the land at the very least. Without that, we could be walking into, well, a death trap if whoever is controlling the Grimm becomes aware of what’s going on and objects to it.”

In another universe, that is precisely what would have happened. With Professor Lionheart’s connivance, Mistral would send most of its hunters to their death in this grandiose scheme, leaving Mistral ripe for the Grimm and eventually leading to another victory for Salem and her followers.

Here, though, Jaune’s concerns stemmed more from Ranma’s own presence than any idea the Grimm King/Queen would decide to deny Mistral Spartoi or whatever. But since Ranma

had left Beacon, he had been attacked twice by Grimm forces when there was no reason for them to do so. *Still, Ranma's operated out in the wild for years and never ran into that kind of trouble. So I guess this ruler's control isn't all that good at range. We, well he, anyway, could get away with this, but...*

"Nora, you and I are the problem here. I am a bit of a klutz, and I know even after Ranma's classes, I still clank sometimes when I move. That we could do something about, though. Your general attitude, on the other hand, we won't." Jaune began, looking to the hammer wielder. "For example, we won't be able to have open fires out in the forest, which means we'll have to do without pancakes."

Nora's eyes widened, and she started going into convulsions at the very thought, while in the light from the nearby houses, Ranma could see that Ren's had dilated, staring straight ahead of him like someone who was having a PTSD episode. Or had seen a cat. One or the other.

"Not a good idea," Ren declared slowly, like someone trying to sneak up on a nuclear weapon. "Seriously. We'd need to do something about that."

Ranma shrugged his shoulders. "I can put a lot of cake mix in my ki space, I suppose, but we still wouldn't be able to have any fires to make them. Not most days, anyway. Or would you be willing to eat cold pancakes? We could make a lot of them before we head out, and I'd carry them in my ki space."

At that, Nora's convulsions stopped, and she began to calm down a bit. "I, er, if Renny makes them, I suppose that will do. You realize we'd have to have lots of them, right?"

"Yeah, whatever, but that isn't the main issue." Wincing, Ranma turned to look out the window, so he didn't have to see his girlfriend's emerald gaze. "While you might have a point about only you having an issue with noises occasionally, Jaune, that's not enough to move through the wilds. You need situational awareness, you need to be able to leave no trace behind, you need to be able to move so silently you can sneak past Grimm, not fight them. That's a tall order, and the more people you have, the more impossible it gets."

"So train us," Pyrrha answered simply. "We can put off heading to the valley of Spartoi for a few days, surely?"

"A, a few days!?" Ranma sputtered, still not looking at any of his friends. "Even with me training you, babe, that's not enough time. Heck, even the emotional control will be hard for you to get a handle on."

"I can help there, as you know," Ren opined. "I get the impression that you are trying to talk us out of joining you while also talking yourself into going. Don't. You might not be our team member..."

“More because JNPRS or JNPRR is just too silly,” Jaune quipped.

Ren smiled at that as he continued. “But that doesn’t mean we are going to let you go off without us. Not if we have any choice.”

Frowning, Ranma shook his head, turning back to look at the back of Ren’s head. “I, I don’t know if you will have any choice, really. Jaune’s right. We need information on the ground, and with the losses the Council said they took to even discover this information on the dust mines, they won’t want to send in any of the teams if they can’t be expected to come back. And I **am** really good at it.”

“See how much leeway we can get for further training, Ranma. With your reputation, the Council will probably listen to you about this, and they can’t deny having more information would be a big help. If we can put off the mission for a few more days, you could train us up to at least not be total liabilities,” Jaune said, his tone turning serious and almost authoritative. “Until then, we won’t know if this is possible or not.”

Only now did Ranma let himself look down at Pyrrha, who was looking up at him with as much determination and resolve as she could muster. “You are not leaving us behind, Ranma. Period. Understood?”

Gulping, Ranma nodded, not even asking what the consequences could be if he tried. “Er, right. Yes, er, I mean, um...” he cut off as she leaned in, pinning Ranma against the door to the backseat of the bullhead. “Erm... I mean, I wouldn’t dream of leaving my friends, erm my girlfriend, behind like that and go into danger on my own. That would be just... wrong of me.”

“Good.” With that, Pyrrha kissed Ranma lingeringly on the lips. Reluctantly pulling back from the kiss, Pyrrha mused, “Besides which, I think I have an idea that might help us. Although I will need to look at a map of Anima first.”

With that, the talk turned to the other hunters they had met that night. Cinder certainly had left an impression on Jaune. “She’s the very epitome of cool beauty, kind of like my sister Arturia without her easy-going nature. I mean, she seemed to be, like, **really** intense.”

“Yeah, I got that impression too, the intensity thing, those eyes of her are really something else.”

“UGH! Tell me about it! My other sister, Lilla? She’s got eyes that can freeze a man to his marrow. Cinder’s eyes make you think she could set his marrow ablaze.”

“Both in a good and bad way, right Jaune? Did you see how many guys there were staring at her ass when she did that sashay thing?” Nora asked, causing Jaune and even Ren to blush for a moment.

“She doesn’t think much of the rich and powerful. I can’t quite put my finger on why I think that, but I do,” Pyrrha added, giggling at the boy’s reaction to Nora’s joke. “Beyond that, I didn’t really get much of an impression, except she enjoyed dancing and seemed to be having fun with doing so with Emerald.”

“Emerald seems nice, but a little... I don’t know. I think she was trying to force it,” Ren added, causing Nora’s snorts of laughter to cut off as she glared at him, then turned away with a huff, unhappy he had even noticed another girl, let alone something so deep.

“Oh, I know that feeling,” Pyrrha muttered, shaking her head. “It’s awfully easy to fall into the habit of putting on a mask at something like that party.”

Jaune nodded. “Yeah, I can see that. Pity that we couldn’t spend more time out in the garage, some of those vehicles, man!” He shook his head, and he and Nora exchanged a nod of appreciation as Ren coasted the bullhead to a stop outside Thetis Ironworks.

As they all got out of the bullhead and Ren removed the steering wheel – a security precaution – Ranma paused, looking at Pyrrha as she stepped out of the bullhead behind him. “Er, this might be a bit late, Pyr, but are your parents going to give you any grief about us staying here tonight? Or anything else?”

“I think if my Manager had been able to get me alone, he probably would have, but my mother is pleased with our relationship and is more than willing to browbeat him into silence. Eventually, he might come back and give trouble, but I don’t think he’ll be able to do much. The real issue will be the media once it gets out and the fact we might try to get out of those interviews you mentioned. As for my staying here, no, I doubt it. I usually stay here, or at the coliseum ever since well, my problems with my Manager began.”

“Hmm... yeah, I’ll get on calling the council when we get in, then if they okay that we can instead try to talk them into a series of exhibition matches instead.”

Pyrrha hummed, while Ranma once again glanced around so quick that Ren alone could spot it. “Wait until tomorrow for that. I want to talk to my Aunt and look at a map first before I suggest anything.”

Ranma noticed she was almost bubbly with whatever idea she was thinking about, her eyes shining with delight in the lights of the apartment’s windows. He wondered what that was about but decided to put it to one side for now. *I’ve got other things to worry about.* With that, he yawned ostentatiously, cracking his neck and back, then said, “Well guys, it’s been a long night. And I think we should all turn in early.”

As he said that, the side door leading directly up to Thetis and Shen’s apartment opened, showing Thetis standing there waiting for them. “Hello, all. Did you have a good time, Pyrrha?”

she asked, her tone implying that she already knew the answer and was just asking for form's sake, her smile somewhat commiserating.

"Surprisingly, yes," Pyrrha replied with a smile. "My teammates and my boyfriend were able to make the night quite festive. I think this is the first time I actually can answer that question positively without perjuring myself."

"I'm pleased to hear it," Thetis laughed, pulling her niece into a hug, winking over her shoulder at the boys and the other girl. "And I am doubly thankful that you have such good friends." As she led them inside, she became more serious. "I have to tell you, though, that it's going to take a few days for us to finish your weapons off. I'll be working on it personally, and I've already got the blade in my forge ready to go, but the rest will take some time. However, since I'd already been working on some armor for you, that is nearly ready to go. I'll be fitting it to you tomorrow."

"Armor," Pyrrha questioned, her brows furrowing. "My armor came through the fight all right, though."

"That's only because you still had aura," Thetis disagreed firmly. "Armor is supposed to protect you once your aura's run out, not just to look good like yours does. Now that you're not an arena warrior, you need to think more about practicality, not just appearance. I'll be making at least rest plates for all of you bar you Jaune. I notice you already had your own chest plate?"

"If it's not too much trouble, I'd like some armor for my legs, please? Just plates for my thighs at the very least," Jaune smiled at the old woman thankfully.

"That's no trouble at all," Thetis laughed again, opening the door to the apartment. "You're my niece's teammates. Why wouldn't I want to make sure that you all are protected as best as I can make you? Beyond that, do you all have any idea of what your plans are going to be?"

The four of them looked at one another, only now noticing Ranma was not with them. For a moment, Pyrrha balked, wondering if he had just taken off to head out to Spartoi and its valley without them. But then common sense and her knowledge of Ranma's character came back to her, and she decided that he wouldn't do that to them. Not after she had made him promise not to. *Whatever he's doing won't have anything to do with that, although that leaves what he actually is up to up in the air.*

Shrugging his shoulders, Jaune debated for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders again. "Well, we can't really tell you much about the mission, part of the reason why we are here is that the Mistral Council wants to use Pyrrha in a bigtime media blitz after we finish. But we're going to be gone for a while, and we're due to leave tomorrow afternoon, although that is looking a less likely now."

“Actually, Auntie, I was thinking about that. If we could wait, I might have an idea that you and Uncle Shen might enjoy,” Pyrrha smiled.

OOOOOOO

“Are we really going to stay here all night just to watch the damn house The Invincible Girl and the rest of those kids are staying in? They’re kids. Hunter kids, but still, it’s not like they’re going to go out and rip up the town, is it?” muttered a man in a dark alleyway to his companion. “And it doesn’t look like they got any idea we’re out here anyway?”

“Shut up,” a second rejoined. “You want to tell Lil’ Miss Malachite that you decided this job was worth it?”

A moment of silence, then a brief shake of the head in the darkness of the alleyway. “No, I don’t mind, just wondering what’s so interesting about the kids that big guy is willing to pay so much for us to just watch them. If it were just Nikos, I could understand, I’ve seen her fights, and they were insane, but the rest, that Azure Warden guy? He’s way too hyped to be reaLLL!!”

The man’s voice trailed off into a quickly choked-off scream as arms came out of the darkness behind them, clamping down around their necks as Ranma choked them both out. Both men were taller than Ranma, but he bent them backward with ease, holding the chokeholds around their necks despite their efforts to get away or use their elbows to hit him.

When he spoke, his voice was almost languid, almost leisurely, as he inquired, “Huh, it’s good to know that this whole idea of following us didn’t come from the local underworld. That would have been awkward since I can’t think of anything I’ve done to piss them off. Yet. Now, this doesn’t have to go any harder than it already is for you guys. I understand you’re just doing your job. You’re just getting paid, nothing personal, right?”

One of the men, understanding his position faster than his fellow, nodded frantically, and Ranma’s hold around his throat loosened. Not to the point where the man could get away. And the fact his flailing elbow and punches hadn’t done anything to Ranma told the man that any attempt to get away wouldn’t work. But at least this way, he could talk. “Yeah, that’s right, we, er, we’re just, this is just a job, that’s all.”

“You mentioned the name, Lil’ Miss Malachite. That’s weird because I know a pair of twins by that name.” Ranma was looking at the man as he spoke and saw his eyes widen. Choking his friend into unconsciousness, Ranma then very gently rested the guy on his back in the alleyway, then released the guy who had actually spoken. “Wait one moment, please,” he said politely.

The man thought about bolting, but this guy was a trained Hunter, and he was the real target of their observations, so he knew he had to be dangerous. *And I am not being paid enough to risk my life against a trained Hunter.*

Ranma punched a few buttons on his scroll, waiting for it to link up to the STC. Soon enough, a drowsy voice on the other line answered, although the video portion of the call didn't open up. "This had better be very freaking good. I was just falling asleep. Oh, and if you are a telemarketer, who was somehow able to get lucky and find this number, I'm going to shove my heels so far up your ass you'll taste the metal for weeks!"

"Hi Melanie," Ranma chortled. "Sorry to call so late."

Hearing her friend's voice, Melanie's tone abruptly changed, becoming a little more aware and much more cheerful. "Ranma! Good to hear from you... but why am I hearing from you now? You never struck me as the sort to just call to catch up with somebody over the scroll. In-person, maybe but not over the scroll."

Ranma shrugged sheepishly. "Heh, sad to say you're right about that. I'll tell you all about what I've been up to since leaving Eastport when I see you next. But as to why I called you, apparently someone's paid a group here to watch us, and they dropped an interesting name as their boss. Lil' Miss Malachite?"

The girl on the other end hissed. "Shit! Wait one." A moment later, the image on the scroll opened up, showing Melanie and her sister, both of them staring into the pickup, extreme bedhead in evidence. The fact that they didn't seem to be wearing anything on their shoulders caused Ranma to flush a little, but he didn't comment, simply keeping his eyes on their own.

Is that all they were paid to do?" Melanie asked.

Ranma looked over at his prisoner, who nodded firmly, staring at Ranma in some surprise. How the guy knew the boss' daughters, who should have been in Vail with their Uncle, was beyond him. But he certainly did.

"Ugh, god damn it, Mom," Melanie grumbled. "We'll talk to her. Just don't do anything rash okay?"

"That will depend on whether or not they stop following us. If the criminals listen to my warning, no harm done. But if I spot them again tomorrow, and they're still following us, we're going to have trouble. I don't deal with the little men. I go straight to the top."

Both twins winced, and then Miltia spoke. "We'll talk to her," she said firmly, repeating her sister's words. "Hopefully, our warnings will outweigh whatever money she's been paid for."

Ranma looked over at the guy who was still staring at him. “Don’t suppose you'd be willing to give me a description of who’s paying you?”

The man shook his head. “I wasn’t at the meaning. You’d have to ask Lil’ Miss Malachite.’

“I just might,” Ranma said. “Let’s just hope that’s the only question I’ll have.” Both twins winced, then turned aside, looked at one another and then nodded. ‘We’ll talk to her. She’s, our mom’s a bitch at the best of times, but that doesn’t mean we want her dead.”

“If for no other reason than that might force the other local idiots there in Mistral to call us back to take over. Ugh,” Melanie muttered, causing Ranma to laugh before ending the conversation. The girls had something else to do tonight before they could get back to sleep after all.

He then turned his attention back to the two criminals who had been watching the house. “Well, guys, I’d suggest you get out of here, okay? You do not want to be here any longer. And you don’t want me to spot you again, got it?”

The single awake criminal nodded frantically, then watched as Ranma leaped up four stories from a standing start, shivering slightly. “Fucking Hunters and their Aura bullshit. I do not get paid enough for this.”

Above, Ranma paused, staring at a large, green potted plant. “Huh. Hadn’t noticed that before. He poked it quizzically. “Wonder what kind of plant that is.” Shaking his head, Ranma turned and leaped away. “Whatever, I’ve got more important things to do.”

OOOOOOO

There were only a few places you could watch a house like the Thetis Ironworks. But watching those positions was an entirely different matter, and while Harry had spotted the watchers, he had not spotted Emerald watching them, and then him, in turn. Knowing what her mission was, she continued to watch but, thanks to the darkness, hadn’t been able to make out much until, greatly daring, Emerald had used her Semblance to mess with Ranma’s mind a bit, allowing her to hide in plain sight on the roof of a building overlooking where Ranma had been talking to the criminals.

Now, watching Ranma enter the apartment via the balcony, she let the illusion drop, blushing in annoyance and exertion *Another inch, and he would have touched my boob! Thank goodness that I know how to project the sensation of touch too. That was too damn close and too damn hard too.*

For every sense Emerald's manipulated in her victim, the amount of Aura use her Semblance, Hallucinations, demanded was doubled. But Emerald had trained in using her powers to use it on several people at once, so even having to fool sight and touch, and hearing just in case, shouldn't have taken much out of Emerald. But Ranma had proven to have a really strong mind, and it had taken her a lot to push the image and sensations she had to into his brain.

Still, it had worked, and Emerald quickly retreated from the area, having no wish to see how paranoid Ranma might be. She was soon back at the opulent hotel room she, Cinder and Mercury was using currently. Mercury was there, looking smug as, on the table between him and Cinder, a message played. Cinder waved Emerald to silence, listening to what sounded like a group of politicians debating some changes to the plan. What changes weren't specified, but the change to the schedule was, causing Cinder to frown.

Eventually, the conversation ended, and she sighed. "Well, Mercury, your work on bugging their cars worked well enough, just not in time. We know that the Warden and JNPR will be doing something different, but what remains in question. Regardless, this whole mission the locals have worked out is an... opportunity. A very large one, I think." She looked over at Emerald. "It only remains to be seen what we need to do to take advantage of it. Emerald?"

Nodding, Emerald began to explain what she had been doing. Cinder's fiery gaze narrowed when Emerald told her about the chance she had taken, but hearing it worked, Cinder allowed a smile to appear on her face. "Thank you, Emerald, that is most interesting. So, Tyrian and Hazel will soon be without their eyes and ears. What will they do, I wonder?"

"The question is, what should we do, Boss?" Mercury asked.

"Hmm... that is indeed the question. I think... I think that I will be contacting Salem tonight. With what we know, it will let me rub my greater knowledge into Tyrian and Hazel's faces, which will be expected of me. And then we will put ourselves in a position to act in Spartoi. One way or another," she mused. "Whatever else, the action will be decided in Spartoi, and I will want us there. But I will not underestimate Ranma, his abilities, or, worse, his ability to cause chaos. Salem has done that too often as it is."

Emerald gulped, and Cinder smiled, patting the thief's thigh where she sat next to the black-haired woman, a fire in her eyes that was well beyond what was normally there and whose cause was very different too. "Don't worry, Emerald, I have learned to hide that kind of thing from Salem." *It remains to be seen if that is all I will hide from her. 'All you're doing is admitting you're a piece on someone else's board, hmm? Well, that might be. But... but if possible, this Queen may become a player too.*

OOOOOO

Early the next day, Pyrrha found Ranma out on the large patio on one lounge chair, having slept there the night before in his sleeping bag. Thetis didn't have enough beds to go around, and Ranma had volunteered to spend the night under the stars, still somewhat annoyed about how quickly the locals had started to trail them. Whoever was behind that had acted far too fast for Ranma's liking. Regardless even with Ranma out of the conversation, there still weren't enough beds for everyone. Nora and Ren had decided to take one, while Pyrrha and Jaune took the last two.

Thetis had teased Pyrrha about sharing a bed with her boyfriend but hadn't pressed the matter. Not that she would have allowed it anyway. While she was happy for Pyrrha that she found a boyfriend, there was a distinct difference between that and aiding them sleeping together.

Now standing next to Ranma, she leaned down, touching his brow then shaking him. Neither worked. Finally, she simply kicked at his legs, intent on knocking them off the lounge chair. Or that was the plan anyway. Instead, Ranma's legs shifted out of the way of her kick, and his hand raised quickly, grabbing at her hand by her side and pulling Pyrrha off balance.

With a whoop Pyrrha fell onto Ranma, at which point he rolled a bit, but Pyrrha gained the upper hand, waking him up with a few jabs to the solar plexus with her elbows. When he finally opened his eyes, it was to stare into Pyrrha's emerald gaze from a bare few inches away. "Mmm, now that is an image I could love to wake up to more often."

Pyrrha blushed, giggling at him, then leaned in, kissing him on the lips. The two lovers held that connection for a bit, then Pyrrha pulled back, pushing her upper body off of Ranma using two hands on either side of his head, then smirked down at him. "Come on, unless you want to miss breakfast, I suggest you get up, Ranma. And thank you for the compliment."

Ranma nodded and released her, letting Pyrrha stand up, before unzipping himself from his sleeping bag, rolling it up and putting it in his ki space. Inside, they found Nora and Ren sitting down at the smaller kitchen table, with Pyrrha's Uncle puttering around the area cooking something.

Not pancakes Ranma was pleased to note. Nora already had a large stack of them in front of her and was chewing on them with all the eagerness of a drug addict getting her fix.

Jaune came in from the other way leading down into the smithy as Pyrrha and Ranma wondered him, nodding in their direction. "Yo, I'm working on a list of things we would need for this jaunt. Sleeping bags, a tent, lots of bungee cords, rope, that kind of thing."

"And you want me to look it over with you," Ranma asked. When he had returned last night, he and the rest of the team had called the Council, outlining the change to the plans they wanted to make. It had taken them a bit, and unfortunately, Pyrrha and Ranma would have to give interviews later that day, along with an exhibition match in a few days, but Ranma's idea of

eliminating the strongest Grimm in the Spartoi Valley before the full attack and reconquest were too good an idea to pass up.

"I've been camping a few times, I know the basics, but yeah, I'd love in a second opinion on things."

"What are all of your plans for the day?" Thetis asked, smiling happily at her role in the plans for the next few weeks. "The replacement for Akuo is almost done, as is the blade for your new weapon. But it's going to take a while yet to finish it. Still, we can work with the rifle and spear configurations on our way to the farm and finish forging it at the farm."

There Thetis alluded to the addition to Ranma's plan that Pyrrha had suggested. Instead of following the main tributary of the Mi'strach, they would cut off into one of the smaller vales, then move over the mountains to on the Spartoi Valley from another angle. This way, they would avoid a series of bogs and an area dominated by a few bandit clans. Hopefully, Pyrrha's plan would let them bypass them entirely as they went about their search and destroy missions, or if not, attack them from another angle entirely.

This would let her visit her grandfather's farm, and her great Uncle was just a bonus. Really... It had nothing to do with the idea of showing her team and her boyfriend the farm she considered her family's real home. Nothing at all. Really.

"Nora has volunteered to head over to the nearest dust shop. Apparently, the order for Dust and bullets we put in last night is ready to go. Ren has obviously agreed to go with her to make certain that nothing happens. And while Pyrrha stays here to get fitted for her new armor, I'll..."

"All of you should stay here for that this morning," Shen interrupted Jaune firmly. "We'll have all of the armor done by lunch, then my wife and I will begin to pack and get ready to leave with you all."

"Are your parents going to join us for this trip?" Ranma inquired, trying to keep any apprehension out of his voice.

"No. My mother is actually going to stay and look after the family of a friend. Her children have all taken sick, and both parents are agoraphobes. They can barely be in the same room with their children at present," Pyrrha answered. She and her mother had a very nice talk earlier this morning, even if Pyrrha would have preferred to sleep in. In that, the two women were entirely opposites: Pyrrha loathed waking up, while Medeve was definitely a morning person. "My father is going to be there in our exhibition match and will be using the images from it in a new ad campaign for a few things, so he won't be going with us."

"Besides, he and Philip have never gotten along," Thetis added. "Philip leaped at the chance to take over the farm after my father passed, while Medeve wanted to sell it."

"I, I never knew that," Pyrrha whispered, her eyes wide. "Why in the world would you want to sell our farm!?"

"Because it could be sold for a lot of money to several of the larger farming magnates," Shen replied. "Medeve has always wanted to move the Nikos clan away from our humble origins." The fact that he and Thetis had agreed with that wasn't something they were going to say now, knowing how Pyrrha thought about the farmstead in the value of Nike as they did.

Pyrrha thanked him and then dug into her cereal, while Ranma had a full breakfast, hash browns, sausages and a large fruit bowl. Looking at it, she shook her head, wondering aloud, "How much work I need to do to have a metabolism that good."

"I'd give you another six or seven months before you get to that level," Ranma answered seriously. "Then three years or so before you're able to use my ki attacks."

The others all looked at him in surprise, and Ranma shrugged. "You all have your Auras unlocked, and Pyrrha, your control of yours is already darn good. There's a direct connection between aura and ki, so it shouldn't take long before you start building up your reserves. As for physically, I think that you will find it a lot easier to your endurance building up over the next few months."

"I rather like the sound of that," Ren muttered. Of the entire team, his Aura reserves were the slowest to rebuild and the smallest to boot. Nora's reserves rebuilt more slowly without using her Semblance, but she actually had quite a bit. As did Pyrrha. She had more than Ren and Nora combined, and her reserves rebuilt quickly.

But none of them came close to Jaune, who was an Aura battery the likes of which Ren had ever met, with an Aura reserve to exceed most Hunters and which could rebuild itself within minutes. *That would almost be intimidating, if not for the fact that it is well, Jaune, I'm thinking about here,* Ren thought to himself with some amusement.

The five of them fell into an easy conversation, pulling Pyrrha's Aunt and Uncle into tales about Beacon and the hijinks they had gotten up to in class and without until they all headed down to be fitted for their armor. For Jaune and Ren, this was easy. Ren's style relied entirely on movement and speed, so he was simply given a pair of vambraces, which molded his body like a second skin, along with a pair of greaves for his feet. Both were so well made they didn't make any noise even when he flexed his wrist or ankle.

They were easily the best set of armor that he'd ever worn, coupled with an undershirt of Kevlar. "It won't stop anything trying to bite you larger than a Beowulf, but it will stop slashes of some of the smaller species of Grim. Not the larger ones. Don't expect it to stop anything trying to pierce it either, like a Montoad's tongue or a Death Stinger's sting."

Despite those warnings from the young apprentice who had done the work, Ren was extremely profuse in his thanks for the gifts. Not so much the little flinch the man's return words caused in Pyrrha. "No worries, man. After all, you're the Invincible Girl's teammate, so it's in our best interests to make certain you all have the best armor we can give you. And if you all become as famous as she is, it'll be great for us when we leave Thetis's to set up our own shops."

Nora was strong enough to be given a chest plate, which she could wear over her normal Huntress outfit. This was coupled with a small wrist guard, which could expand into a buckler. Nora instantly began to play with it, miming blocking and dodging attacks as she did, complete with noises, much like Ruby would have done.

Ranma disdained any offer of armor, shaking his head and gesturing to Ren. "My style's like Ren's, and I haven't seen any kind of metal beyond Jaune's sword or my own shield that is tougher than my own skin." Normally, that would sound like a boast, but Ranma's somewhat apologetic air took the sting right out of the words.

Still, Thetis had to ask. "Even without Aura?"

"Heh, um, my Aura doesn't work like most peoples'. So that's not an issue either."

When it came to his turn, Jaune took the cake. "Er, Ms. Thetis, I, um, I really think this is a bit much."

"We'll be the judge of that Jaune boy, now get out here!" Nora shouted into the changing area.

"Ugh. Fine." With that, Jaune came out of the changing room, and everyone there, even Ranma, stared.

Gone was the hoody, jeans and the small chest plate. Instead, Jaune wore black leggings and a black, skintight undershirt. Over this, he wore what amounted to a full plate suit of armor. His shoulder pads, bracers, and chest plate were all separate pieces, attached to an undershirt that presumably had extra padding to it. The armor left his elbows and joints free to move, with the bracers being somewhat small, while the greaves were large, coming up all the way to his knee.

"This was a work we actually came up with for an old Mistrali General lad, but I got to admit it looks good on you," Shen murmured.

On one arm, Jaune also held a new shield Thetis had picked out for him. It too was white and was huge, a kite shield that was as tall as Jaune was, and broad, before tapering down into a tip, much like, yes, a kite. "Yeah, well, maybe, but I don't know about this shield. I already have one."

“Yes, but you said it yourself, Jaune. Your shield is more used as a sheath than anything else, and isn’t made of the same metal as your sword, so what’s the point?” Thetis replied. “This shield isn’t made of the same stuff that your sword is either, but it is still going to be extremely durable, and that central crystal can release an explosion at need, which means even if you don’t count the size, it’s a major step up from your original. Ah, the controls for the explosion dust weapon are part of the grip.”

Ranma nodded while one of the younger apprentices nearby stared at Jaune, a blush suffusing her features for a second before she looked away. Looking at that, Ranma grinned, then moved over to Nora, whispering something in his ear. She was already smirking before he did, but her smirk widened noticeably, and she gestured to Jaune to pick up Crocea Mors. “Pose for us!”

“Wait, what?” Jaune yelled. “I don’t think comfortable with that.”

“I said pose!” Nora growled, and with a yelp, Jaune quickly grabbed up his sword and held it at shoulder height, slamming his new kite shields bottom down onto the ground as if he was waiting for a charge.

Nora took a picture, then grinned, and sent it to Ruby and her team with the message. “What do you think about Jaune’s makeover?”

“You realize they won’t reply right away, right?” Pyrrha asked, giggling. “It’s class time back in Beacon right now.”

To Jaune’s dismay, Yang replied in a heartbeat. Reading her message, Ranma could almost hear her voice shouting out, “Oh my God, is that vomit boy! My little sister has gone so red that she looks almost like she’s tried to turn into a rose instead of just leaving their petals behind!”

“What have you done to my partner Nora! I was just demanding she start to take notes wh...” Weiss, oddly, was next, but her message faded out in such a way that it almost implied through text that she too was blushing right now.

“Mission accomplished?” Ranma asked with some amusement reading the comments over Jaune’s scroll.

The other young man flushed a little, scratching at his cheek and muttering, “Do I look really look that good?”

Pyrrha nodded firmly. “You look very good indeed. Not quite my type, but still very good.”

“Ouch,” Jaune said with a laugh, winking at her and Ranma.

“Still, more seriously, I like the idea of Jaune with a kite shield. You’re a tank dude, and that can only help you do your job in any battle even better. But... hmmm...” Ranma trailed off as a shiver went down Jaune’s spine. “But for right now, do you need Jaune around this afternoon? And the exhibition match is this evening, right?”

“No, I’ve copied out Ruby’s designs for Pyrrha’s new weapon, and I’ve taken all the notes I can on Crocea Mors. Studying that thing would be the work of a lifetime, I think.” She scratched at her chin thoughtfully, staring off into the distance in the same manner that Pyrrha sometimes did. “I wonder if I could get away with adopting Ruby. That way, when you two marry, that sword will become family property.”

“Hey now! That’s a little bit ahead of... I mean, wouldn’t she become an Arc and er... Jaune stammered, before sighing, while Ren attempted to point out that Ruby’s father was still very much alive, only for his moment of logic to be utterly ignored. “Anything I say now is going to make it worse, isn’t it?”

“Probably,” Ranma said commiseratingly. “But don’t worry, if she’s done with you, that means that we can leave, and you won’t have to be teased anymore.”

“What exactly will be doing instead?” Jaune asked cautiously.

“We’re going to find a park or someplace, and then we’re going to train you using your new shield.”

Jaune paled, the shiver from earlier coming back with friends. “Oh please God, not the Dodge game!”

“No, that would defeat the purpose. With that shield, I think I’m going to have to come up with a new game: Grin and Take it,” Ranma answered with a smirk.

“Oh God, my life is flashing before my eyes. Ren, voice of sanity and best his of friends, help,” Jaune whimpered.

Ren cocked his head to one side, and then it was his turn to gasp, as Ranma snagged him, a hand clamping on his shoulder, the other young man has moved so fast that Ren hadn’t seen him move. “Nope, I’ve got a few exercises for Ren too. His endurance needs a lot of work, and there was only so much we could do about it on the ship.”

The two men now both looked like a deer in the headlights. JNPR had dealt with Ranma’s training schedules onboard the ship, and the worst of the times they’d had was when he had figured out something new he wanted to teach them. Strength speed and technique training were all well and good. It was when Ranma got creative that the training became painful. Ranma thought that physical limitations were a sign of a weak mind and was determined to prove it to everyone.

However, Ren had a ready-made excuse. "Wait! Wait, you don't want Nora to go to the dust store on her own. Without someone to watch over her, who knows what she could do."

"Ren, I'm not that bad! You make it sound like I'm a kid in a candy store. I only tried to eat one Dust Crystal once, just once," Nora huffed, throwing her arms up in the air.

All the others stared at her, and then Ranma nodded. "I suppose you have a point that is a little more pressing than training your endurance today. I'll have to figure out a way to train you once we're on the boats."

Internal flights of any length were not a thing here in Mistral, except for the most important people, so they would be heading out on a riverboat that night.

"But that will leave Jaune in my hands,"

Jaune groaned, looking towards his partner. But instead of helping, she was actually pouting, kicking the floor like a child, muttering about how it was unfair. And Jaune remembered with a sinking heart that she **liked** training with Ranma. "Erm, maybe I should go with..."

By that point, Ranma had had enough. He lifted Jaune up off of the ground, pulling Jaune's shield off his arm and sticking it into his ki space along with Crocea Mors as he hefted Jaune like a sack of potatoes onto one shoulder. "Resistance is futile, Jaune."

"Help!" Jaune appealed to the team.

"Remember, suffering breeds character, Jaune!" Nora shouted, cackling with glee, while Ren bowed his head as if praying for his friend's soul, and Pyrrha kept pouting as Ranma made for the front door.

**End Chapter 20, Episode 1**