

Hey guys, this is the next SOH episode style update. It isn't as Long as I would have hoped, but it covers all the scenes I wanted it to, if not quite as much detail. In other news, I will be waiting until 10 tonight to update FILFy Teacher. Neither of its editors were feeling up to looking it over entirely, so I am hoping that one or both will have it to me by then. Regardless, I will post the PDF and word versions of it here on Patreon at around 11.

Remember folks, I will be ending the Patron only poll early in March, and I will only promise to update one episode-style type story this month, the opposite of whichever wins the Patron only poll.

Semblance of Hope Episode 1: Chapter 19, Part 2: A Battlefield of Another Name

Looking at Pyrrha's parents, Ranma wasn't certain what to do. After all, this was the first time he was meeting a girlfriend's parents. *Yet another aspect of this whole girlfriend thing, that I never had to deal with before*, he thought to himself.

Pyrrha on the other hand didn't seem to have any doubts on what to do. She moved forward, embracing her mother. While their faces were very different, their bodies were similar, bar the age difference, and except for the ginger hair the older woman possessed rather than the crimson locks Pyrrha sported. Her father also had slightly reddish ginger hair and looked even more related to Pyrrha.

As she hugged her mother, Pyrrha was not surprised to hear the woman whisper, "Oooh, I thought I detected something interesting in that spar of yours with the Azure Warden. You seem to have found yourself a catch my dear, and one who is, admittedly, far closer to your own age than most of the people I tried to set you up with. I'd apologize, but..." the older woman shrugged as she stepped back from the hug.

"I knew why you were doing it Mother," Pyrrha answered somewhat repressively. "And I am not dating Ranma for his Semblance or the strength of his Aura. Those honestly don't even register in terms of our relationship. Although I will admit his overall skill was part of why I found myself drawn to him."

"Perhaps your relationship, but not the future," Sally replied firmly. Then she grinned impishly, and pulled fully out of the hug, poking her daughter firmly in her firm, toned stomach, her tone turning wicked. "And I'd wager that there is a direct correlation to Aura reserves and something el~se. That's scientific fact after all~."

Knowing exactly what her mother was talking about, Pyrrha blushed rosily, shaking her head firmly. "We're taking our time Mother, so it will be a while before I can prove or disprove that particular old wives' tale."

"Waiting? Really? You didn't get that from my side of the family for sure," Sally laughed, before looking at her daughter more closely. "You look good," she said finally. "I had my reservations about you going to school so far away. I understood why, but that didn't mean I had to like it."

"Still, you look good," the old woman repeated, the words freighted with more meaning than such a simple phrase would normally convey.

Pyrrha nodded at her, and then, when her father moved to try to give her a hug in turn, thrust out her hand firmly. "Manager."

Her father growled, his hands clenching as he gripped her arm. He had been a Huntsman at one point, but he had let himself go to seed quite badly, only retaining the Aura reserves that he had as a Huntsman and that couldn't augment his strength enough to let him make his daughter even wince.

The relationship between father and daughter had been strained for a while and had steadily gotten worse the more her father had used her fame and fortune to try to rise in Mistrali society. Sally was somewhat the same, but she wasn't as blatant about it, nor did she wish to rise in society so much as among those who believed in Semblance or Aura marriages, which was a slightly different thing. Sally was a matchmaker and a social butterfly, not someone who wanted to be a social and business mover and shaker like her father.

"It's good to see you back Pyrrha, for good I trust. Although I have to say I disprove of that bit of foolishness you all performed at the docks. That would have been a perfect moment too..."

"We are not back for good, Manager, and as for my addressing the crowd, at no point was my needing to speak out in the public ever mentioned. Especially under circumstances like that. You know I've never been happy with doing that or any of the endorsement stuff," Pyrrha interrupted him rudely.

Medeve seemed to breath in heatedly, but Ranma interjected this point, stating calmly, "Thanks to the teen's actions at Waypoint, the Council of Vale decided that despite still being Freshmen, the teams involved could be treated as full-time hunters. The Mistrali Council then requested Pyrrha, her team and me for an assignment. But if that assignment turns out to be some kind of photo op, we will not be taking part in it. I don't freaking care about anything but doing our job as Hunters. Politics can kiss my ass."

"I rather think that's not your decision to make," the older man shot back angrily. "My daughter is a Mistrali citizen, and as a Hunter team, you follow the orders of the local council!"

"Nor is it yours. And yeah, as an active Huntress, Pyrrha answers to the council. Not to her manager," Ranma replied, repeating the use of the word manager rather than calling the man Pyrrha's 'father.' "But since they are still freshmen, I was given discretionary power on how to comport ourselves here. So I say again, we're here to do a job. It's a job for Hunters. It ain't a PR job. You want someone to jump through hoops, find someone else."

"Now see here you!" Medeve growled, waving a finger in Ranma's face. "I don't care how famous you are as a mere Hunter, but here in Mistral, being a Gladiator matters far more. And I will not let you or my daughter's own foolishness get in the way of..."

Ranma looked down at the finger, and then up at the man who owned the hand that contained the finger, and his voice came out almost conversational for all the threat in it as he interrupted the other man's diatribe. "Remove your anger to my face, unless you want to lose it."

"Manager, Ranma is telling the truth," Pyrrha interjected firmly, grateful that her boyfriend was backing her up here, but not willing to let him fight this battle alone. "I am not back here to resume being a public icon. I am tired of being a symbol!" Pyrrha suddenly shouted, getting in her father's face angrily, Ranma's backing having forced out some measure of the anger she had towards the man.

She waved off Sally, who tried to interject, pointing at them both, practically trembling with repressed emotion. "I, I am sick and tired of being on a pedestal, of being seen as this, this untouchable goddess of victory. The fame the fortune you can take all that and shove it!"

Behind her, Ranma was nodding his head firmly and proudly. He and Nora, and even Jaune and Ren, had taken pains to work with Pyrrha on saying 'no' aboard the ship and Ranma had heard that she'd been able to do the same to the Mistral Council earlier that same day. It was good to see that wasn't a fluke. *Although here, a lot of buried feelings are helping things along.* Regardless, Ranma was happy to see it.

"I am not your tool to gain fame and fortune, Manager! I am not this untouchable, perfect goddess image. I have been beaten and several times over the past few days. I have been pushed to my limits, which was what I wanted when going to beacon. Nothing like the stupid, pathetic excuses for combat that I faced in that last tournament. This is the life I want to lead, a life where my strength of arms mean more than how good I look or how perfect I seem!"

"That image has let us move from a barely important family of farmers to being famous and rich, daughter! I..."

There was a buzzing noise as a flash of electricity burst between Pyrrha and her father and Sally pushed her husband back with a gentle but inexorable hand. "I think that we have taken this as far as we can without words being exchanged that both would regret."

From the look on her face, Pyrrha wasn't certain that she would regret anything, or it could be that she was already regretting some of the words now that the confrontation was slowly ebbing away. Ranma wasn't certain, but he put an arm around her shoulders regardless in support, causing Sally to smile at him. "It's good to meet you Azure Warden, even under these circumstances. I hope you can keep my little girl happy."

Ranma smiled back lopsidedly, "I kind of think that's a two-way street, right?"

"In the best relationships it certainly is," Sally replied with a nod, before looking at her husband. "Come on, I think both of you need a timeout," she said firmly, pushing at his chest.

The man grumbled, but gave way, and father and daughter exchanged one last heated glare, before they turned away. "You will come to tonight's soiree. That is where you'll get your orders from the Council," Medeve informed them over his shoulder, eager to get in the last word of their argument, "and you will be fully presentable there as well."

"Don't worry dear, I'll spread the word that you already have a boyfriend. You won't get any propositions on that score. Or if you do, you're free to shoot them down as bluntly as you wish," Sally said as an aside, still pushing her husband along.

Throughout this short, sharp exchange, the rest of team JNPR had been set sitting there, quiet and unobtrusive so as to avoid taking part in this drama, extremely uncomfortable at even witnessing it. Now, Jaune spoke up, giving voice to all their thoughts, even those of Nora. "Well, that was awkward. Almost like being at home and seeing my parents having an argument, only way worse. So, what do we do, boss?" While he led team JNPR, Jaune knew Ranma was the leader of this mission.

"I don't think we're going to get out of appearing at this party tonight," Ranma scowled. "Sorry, guys, but if it's where we are supposed to get our orders, then we can't get out of it."

Nora grimaced. "If we have to appear at this shindig tonight, does that mean we have to get into dresses?"

"You fight in a combat skirt," Jaune asked, "Why would that bother you?"

"Are you kidding? Have you seen my legs?" Nora stuck them up almost vertical, showing how flexible she was in a way that would've made most men gulp. "If I show off these bad boys anymore, I'll have to beat off the boys with a stick since they probably won't let me use my hammer. But a stick is so boring."

“Actually, I would wager we could get away with our Huntress Garp,” Ranma said. “They expect us to be on show, why not give them one?”

Pyrrha nodded, indicating she agreed with Ranma, and Jaune nodded after a few seconds, nodding as well. “Ranma’s right. Hunter garb tonight, team.”

“But before that, let’s see if we can start working on replacing your weapons,” Thetis said announcing her presence, peering over Jaune’s shoulder suddenly. Jaune yelped, not having realized the older woman had come back from walking her brother and his wife out of the smithy. She now pulled his sword out from its sheath, staring at it in awe. “Is this a genuine Masume Blade?”

“A what now?” Jaune blinked. “I mean I know the metal on it is special, but I never heard that name before.”

“You probably wouldn’t, only blacksmiths like me would be familiar with his name. He was a famous blacksmith from Vale way before Vale actually emerged as a single nation. How long has your family had this blade anyway?”

“About a thousand years give or take?” Jaune said with a careless shrug. “We’ve always had it, as far back as our records go.”

“Fascinating!” Thetis’s hands began to activate her Semblance, as she touched the metal of the blade. Jaune was about to object, but she glared up at him for a second. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to heat the blade to the point of damaging it, I just want to see how much it takes before it even starts to heat up.”

Unfortunately for Thetis, this proved to actually be a quite a bit more than she could handle. Her Semblance was Aura intensive, the hotter the flame and the longer she held the heat in her hands, the more Aura it burned through. After about five minutes, while the others began to talk quietly, and Pyrrha informed them about what to expect at a formal gala, Jaune watched as the older woman tried to heat up his blade. After 10 minutes, Teresa was sweating. After 15, visible twirls of heat were coming off not only her hands but the rest of her body. After twenty, she was gasping, shaking her head, and after another minute, she had to give up. She put the sword down and onto the filigree along the hilt and guard. Nothing about the blade itself had changed at all. It looked as cool as when she had begun. “Fuck!”

She shook her head, looking up at Jaune. “You, and you Pyrrha, with me. Let’s start fixing your armor first love. Then you can call Ruby and we can start planning out your weapons. While I examine that blade. Even without warming it up, there might be something I can do with it.”

“What about us?” Ren asked, the quietest of the group speaking up for the first time in a while.

Ranma spoke up before Thetis could. “You two, refill your Dust rounds and grenades. I know we’re all running on empty there. And maybe make certain Nora’s pancake portion is filled, since I don’t think they will have them at the party tonight.”

“WHAT?!” Nora gasped in horror. “A party without pancakes, why I oughta...” That was all Nora could get out before Ren clapped a hand over her mouth and he pulled Nora away and back into the house.

This left Ranma alone for a bit, forgotten by Thetis and her husband in their enthusiasm to get to work and with JNPR all busy. This was fine by Ranma. He had some information to brush up on.

OOOOOOO

As Ranma and Pyrrha were having the confrontation with her parents, Cinder and Emerald were arriving in the city Mistral via air flight. It was slow going thanks to the distance involved, having been more than twenty-four hours in the air, but still, that was much faster than taking a ship. Few goods could be transported via air due to the mass vs Dust ratio, certainly nothing in bulk, and this made such flights insanely expensive for all but the military.

But Cinder refused to travel in anything but style when she could and thanks to the Inner Circle agent called the Cowardly Lion, Cinder and her two fellows were able to get tickets. Indeed, it even worked well with their background, which at present was much more solid in Mistral than in Vale. In Mistral, they were returning Huntsmen, who had been on leave after their fourth team member had been badly injured. Neo, of course. But Neo wasn’t with them just yet, since Roman had needed her to help lead the remnants of the White Fang’s forces as they set up a new base.

Physically, Cinder was nearly back to one hundred percent after feeling the anger of Salem through their link so often of late. Despite that she had done nothing to stop Emerald from waiting on her hand and foot throughout the flight, Emerald had, although Cinder had made a point of making certain that the girl was looking after herself as well. She had and even allowed Emerald to indulge in her penchant for larceny a couple of times among the other travelers, so long as it couldn’t be traced back to the two of them.

Then again, Emerald mostly returned the items or placed them where they could be found later. With Cinder taking care of the money side of things, Emerald had no need to steal to survive. She did it because it was fun, and because she still harbored a certain hatred for most of the upper class, something Cinder fanned occasionally.

Now as the luxury bullhead settled down on the landing grid, Cinder exited their room, looking around for their other compatriot. “Where is Mercury?” The black-haired woman paused, frowning as something occurred to her. “In fact, I do not believe I have seen him practically this entire flight.”

Emerald rolled her eyes. “Oh, he’s off flirting with one of the flight attendants. Apparently, he got lucky last night and wants to make it a regular thing while we’re here in Mistral.”

“I suppose it takes all kinds,” Cinder quipped, smiling slightly, as the two women made their way through the me area of the plane. Cinder though couldn’t see the appeal. Intellectually, she kind of saw that Mercury was handsome, but his attitude was a tremendous turnoff.

Mind you, having him amuse himself has made certain this trip remained pleasant. Just hours of either being by myself, or being with Emerald, reading, talking, sleeping, without the need to be constantly on guard or planning.

The haste of this entire trip still left a bad taste in Cinder’s mouth, but the manner of travel had much to us allow Cinder to set those concerns aside. She still felt that Salem was making mistakes, concentrating so many resources on this Azure Warden rather than proceeding with Cinder’s plans. They were reacting, not acting. Still, Cinder knew that Salem took anything to do with the Maiden’s powers personally and she lost some of her objectivity in doing so.

Mind you, Cinder reminded herself, not for the first time on the strip, I perhaps am also biased. After all, I have much to gain from continuing my operation in Vale, do I not? Even with all the issues, Amber is still there, somewhere, her powers ripe for the taking.

Just then, her scroll began to ping with incoming notifications, and she frowned, looking at it quizzically. She had not been anticipating any calls, but after a moment, she noticed that it was coming in from the Cowardly Lion, presumably something to do with their cover as senior grade Huntsman from the Academy at Haven.

Reading it, Cinder slowly nodded. “Emerald, be a dear, and fetch Mercury, would you? Whatever he’s doing, or planning.” Cinder let Emerald snort in amusement before going on her own tone serious. “We have plans to make. And I want to make certain that both of you are clear on your roles going forward.”

OOOOOOO

Already it was obvious the soirée that team Juniper and Ranma had basically been ordered to attend was going to be as stuck-up as the use of the term ‘soirée’ implied, Ranma

thought glumly. The dozens of limousines and extremely ornate bullheads parked in the lawn of the mansion that they had been directed to was certainly a clue in that direction.

While Jaune was ecstatic, pointing at several of limousines. “Oh my God, that’s a Barrel-Doyce Ghost, and an Atari 854 and a Panther CS9! Oh my god and is that a Draco special!” his squeal was so loud Ranma reflected he could hear glass cracking from some of the car windows as he raced over to an, admittedly, kickass looking bike, all black metal and leather. “Yang is going to be so jealous! The Arc Knight raced over to it, taking pictures from every angle he could before moving onto two of the supercars in particular.

Nora also looked interested in the cars, although she wasn’t taking pictures, and she had begun to bounce on her heels, hearing some kind of music coming from the large mansion that was up a cobbled path a bit from where they had been told to park.

Ren on the other hand looked very worried. “Are you sure that we will be able to get away with wearing our Hunter outfits? I know Hunters are supposed to sometimes interact with the upper crust, but this is all happening well before I had anticipated doing so. And all of this is a world away from the orphanage where Nora and I grew up.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Ranma chuckled. “We’ll stick out like sore thumbs sure, but for the right reasons. They expect Hunters and Huntress is to stick out. Give them what they expect and then some. Beyond that, don’t get cornered, do not make any kind of social, political or romantic statement in public. Flee anyone who seems to be asking you too many questions quickly, stick to the main rooms, drink in moderation,” Ranma counted off some points on his fingers, “and, search for kids.”

“Wait, what?” Pyrrha asked. The rest of Ranma’s points were things she had already known, having never once gone to any of these soirées in anything but her Huntress outfit. To do otherwise would have been to send the wrong signal and it had helped her keep out of possible social entanglements. It also played into her whole Invincible Girl image, which her manager had very much liked.

Not that at this point his likes or dislikes were truly registering with Pyrrha any longer. *My need to have his approval, or that of anyone beyond my friends, team and Ranma, is, several weeks behind me.* The thought was insanely liberating, but Pyrrha knew her newfound ability to, as Nora put it, not be too polite for the world, was still fragile and she was worried she might backslide tonight.

“Camouflage,” Ranma replied bluntly a smirk on his face as he turned to look at her, winking and letting his eyes flash down to her bared legs before looking back up at Pyrrha’s now flushed face. “Think about it. No one is going to flirt with you, or even start a serious conversation with you, if you’re playing around with kids. And, as much as you probably don’t want to hear it Pyrrha, it’ll make for good PR, but in a very different way, so at least a portion of the crowd will be all for it.”

As their leader and Pyrrha's boyfriend, Ranma had decided to treat this whole night like it was a fight, only in an arena he didn't know much about. So while Pyrrha had been fitted with a new outfit – which was basically her old outfit for the moment – he had done some research. Not so much about the people, only the battlefield. And then he had come up with his own strategy after seeing that these parties usually had a few preteens or teens around the edges.

Pyrrha frowned at her boyfriend, crossing her arms and stopping in her tracks, perforce making the others stop too. As she did, Pyrrha was forced to remember once again that she no longer had her weapons on her. The others did, either at their sides or on their backs, but her weapons were still being forged by her Aunt Thetis. "Explain, please. The last thing I want to do is be even more in the public limelight."

"First, this won't be putting you in the public limelight really. What will they say? 'Yes, I was there at the party and oh yes, the invincible girl showed up. She was playing with kids.' That's not exactly front-page news. Or if it is, it'll make people realize that you have a softer side to you than your invincible girl persona."

He stopped, reaching out to gently tuck a bit of her hair back behind her head and her ear, causing her to smile and blush at the same time. "And, you'll have fun with the kids too. Trust me, at something like this, the parents brought along the kids to be seen and not heard. They'll all be feeling awkward, kind of crazy bored, and if they have a celebrity like you to play with, they'll go all-out to impress you. Which can always be hilarious."

Pyrrha giggled, shaking her head at that, while Nora hopped up and down, grinning. "Kids are cool! They always have a great imagination, and fun stories and stuff. So let's go! I want pancakes!"

"Says the girl who ate all of the pancakes my aunt could make us earlier," Pyrrha muttered, the others racing after Nora.

As they went, Jaune turned to Ranma asking, "How exactly did you come up with that stuff anyway?"

"While you lot went back to talking weapons with Ruby and Pyrrha was getting fitted for her new outfit, I looked up pictures of similar parties. I didn't study people in the center of the frames you know, I studied around them, and the kids, the fixed expressions and everything. I was also at some of these parties with my Old Man a time or two before coming to Semaphore."

A few of those had actually resulted in martial arts matches, and at one point, Ranma had been forced to pair up with Kodachi against one of her rivals. That had been a very interesting learning experience all on its own. *I hope we don't have to have Martial Arts Ballroom Dancing here, Pyrrha does not have the skirt for it.*

As they closed with the mansion, Pyrrha despaired. The soirée had a meat-and-greet line at the entrance, and she was instantly pulled by her manager into a few pictures, Sally looking on apologetically. *Manager you are, and manager you will f, fucking stay!* Pyrrha thought vindictively even as she didn't fight things, cursing herself for stumbling over cursing even in her own head.

But after the third set of having her picture taken with Mr. so-and-so of so-and-so international or whatever, Pyrrha had long since stopped actually listening to their titles, she felt a firm hand on her elbow, and Ranma propelled her on, saying, "We're holding up the event here ladies and gentlemen, there are other guests arriving."

Pyrrha shot him a grateful smile, and then, spotted something to one side, a group of kids clustered around the entrance to the gardens of the mansion, which was open to the party. As Ranma had predicted, they were preteen kids, 12 to 14, all of them dressed up in finery and all of them looking a little out of place.

She directed Ranma's attention there subtly with her eye and soon her team formed up around them, as they made their way over. Jaune was the first to make introductions, the kids having turned in awe as Pyrrha and her fellow Hunters approached them. But Jaune was a big brother and a middle sibling, and knew precisely how to put them at ease, despite being complete strangers. He and Nora were an instant hit with the kids and soon all of the kids and the five Hunters were out on in the garden, smiling and joking around with them.

And to Pyrrha's delight, it worked. The parents were smiling and happy, amused to see the Hunters joking around and having fun with her kids. The few reporters there were somewhat pleased too, taking pictures of this fantastic humanitarian moment. And thus, no one was willing to try to approach Pyrrha or get her alone, surrounded by team and preteens.

How long they played with the kids, Pyrrha didn't know. Jaune and some of the kids had found a giant chess set, the toy kind, which had plastic pieces basically the size of the kids and were making a game of it as Jaune taught them how to play. Nearby, Ranma and Pyrrha were playing with a few girls' hairs.

Ranma had proven shockingly good at haircare while on the ship, and Pyrrha had roped him into it despite his protests. Ren was helping Jaune teach chess, making up stories and backgrounds for each of the pieces as they went, which the kids lapped up. *And is that man over there writing his words down? How odd.* Nora, to no one's surprise, was the type to want to play horse, and was busy carrying three kids all around the gardens, while chasing two more, causing laughter and shrieks of delight.

Done with braiding hair for the time being Ranma and Pyrrha moved over to help Jaune and Ren teach the finer points of chess, with Pyrrha moving to take one of the Knight pieces, saluting crisply to one of the kids, causing him to laugh, "Your orders sir?"

Ranma moved to take the other Knight piece, that put his chin in the air, as he pretended to be holding a lance forward. "All troops forward charge!"

"Silly!" one of the kids, who had been learning chess from Jaune said. "The Knight doesn't charge. Charges are in a straight line, the Knights move like an L."

"Wait, the Knights don't charge?" Ranma gasped, slapping his hands to his face in a comical expression of amusement that one of the nearby picture takers, who had not ceased to watch Pyrrha and the others, had to take a picture of. He then shook his head with a sigh. "Oh well. That's good I suppose, I've never been good at moving in straight lines."

The boy acting as the king looked at him quizzically, and Ranma grinned, tapping his nose "Why would you move in a way that your enemies can expect?"

The younger boy nodded sagely at that, as if Ranma had just given him some true world wisdom, but they were interrupted by a voice from the other side of the large chess set, a female voice, sultry, low and amused, "Pawn to E-2."

Looking up, Ranma noticed that they had been joined by two other people. These were not normal partygoers, instead, they too look like Huntresses. The one who had spoken was wearing dark black body armor, covering her chest and her legs and arms. She had two swords strapped to her waist one on either side of her body, peace-bound as all of their weapons had been, long lustrous black hair and almost gleaming amber eyes. A faint smirk was on her face, which was more heavily made-up with makeup than either Nora or Pyrrha. In particular, her crimson lipstick stood out, all in that white face.

The other girl was heavily tanned as if to make up for the white color of her teammate's skin and was dressed in a tan crop top and white shorts. Like her teammate she was a dual wielder, though in her case she had two handgun knives strapped at the small of her back. She had green hair, red eyes, and a more natural seeming smile on her face, as she moved forward to move the piece that the other girl had said.

Yet as Ranma's looked at them, something about them screamed danger to his mind. The eyes of the black-haired woman were just a little too predatory, a little too fixated on him. *That's the look of a woman who's sizing me up for something. Heh, is she the type to take games way too seriously, or it's my virtue or my life that's in danger here or both?*

The other one, Ranma couldn't put his finger on why, but the way she moved bothered him. It was almost as if he had seen something like it before, but not quite. *Still, they are Huntress is, it's to be expected that they're dangerous.* Despite that thought, Ranma made a note to watch these two closely.

Beyond them stood a somewhat older man, and Ranma noticed out of the corner of his eye that Pyrrha had stiffened very slightly at the sight of him. He was a middle-aged man with a

mane of graying tan hair and an equally graying beard, dark brown eyes and an expression that seemed to be the kind to shift from jovial to worried in an instant.

He wore a brown greatcoat with a matching mantle, which had cross emblems on each side. He also wore a white dress shirt under his coat, a western necktie and carried a pocket watch. He also wore dark brown slacks and dress shoes.

“Headmaster Lionheart,” Pyrrha greeted, bowing her head very slightly to the man. “Ranma, team, this is the headmaster of Haven Academy. He attempted to convince me to go to Haven instead of Beacon.”

“But then we wouldn’t have met!” Nora shouted, appearing behind Pyrrha with such an abruptness that Pyrrha, and indeed many of the kids, shrieked, while the ginger haired girl clasped the redhead from behind, hugging her tightly. “That wouldn’t have been fun at all! Who’d our fearless leader partnered up with then?”

“Hahaha, yes, well, while I cannot answer that question, Indeed I am the Headmaster of Haven,” the man answered bowed from the waist. “I saw you all over here and decided that I would introduce you to two of Haven’s alumni Hunters that you will be working with on the... Upcoming operation.”

The woman smiled slightly, nodding politely from her position on the other side of the giant chess set. “My name is Sabrina Fall, this is Evelyn Summerset. How do you do?”

The others introduced themselves, and when it became time for him to do so Ranma did as well, watching Cinder’s eyes. They flicked from person-to-person, lingering on Pyrrha for a second, but now they were back on him, boring in, one eyebrow rising.

“I’ve heard of you, the Azure Warden. I am pleased to make your acquaintance,” she said, her tone adding a certain texture to it that made the words flirtatious, as she cocked her hip, looking around at the kids at the giant chess board and said, “Whose idea was this, can I ask? It certainly livens up the party. I’ve never enjoyed them. I prefer... more private affairs.”

It really was too good an opportunity to pass up, Cinder reflected, staring across at the chess set at Ranma. That opportunity was to actually meet the person who had so far been messing up her plans without even trying. The man who had captured Adam Taurus and who had led the successful defense of Waypoint. Where he had used a Maiden’s powers.

She was sure of that now. This close to him, she could feel the small Grimm bug that she had been given by Salem to drain away Amber’s powers reacting to the presence of another maiden. How a male had been able to garner such power, she had no idea, nor did Cinder care. Rather, Cinder wondered if they were able to defeat Ranma, could they siphon off his Maiden powers as well?

Still, that was for another time. Now is the time to play her role, and more importantly, gain information firsthand about Ranma and how he thought and acted. That was why Mercury was not present at the party. Given what she knew of Ranma's abilities, and the fact that he routinely called himself a martial artist instead of a Hunter in the news conferences that she had seen him in, Cinder had decided that she couldn't take the chance that he would somehow be able to oust Mercury as the watcher from Eastport, despite not having seen his face or hair.

Jaune took the credit for the playing of the chess game and Cinder decided to wait for a second as Emerald, to Cinder's surprise, actually got into it almost as much as Nora, shouting, "Forward my minions."

Of course with kids - and Nora - having taken the role of many of the pieces, the game soon evolved into a game of tag. This ended up with Nora playfully decapitating the King piece, before freezing as Ren and Jaune shouted, "Nora!"

"Now see, this is why we can't have nice things, Nora," Ranma scolded while winking at one of the kids who had taken the opportunity to launch a revolution, toppling the queen and king both and declaring themselves the ruler.

At that point, the parents of the various kids, including the mother of the young master of the mansion, decided enough was enough. They came over and started to try to take control of things, calming everything down. At that point, Lionheart and the Huntresses and Hunters were very pointedly told to head back inside for food.

"You all explained to me why you decided to start playing chess, but why did you decide to start playing with the children?" Cinder asked.

"Camouflage," Nora bubbled happily. "Ranma had the idea of using them as shields against the paparazzi and the rest of the crowd and it worked too."

"Until someone forgot it was a game and decided to decapitate one of the enemy points like he was a Beowulf," Jaune growled, pushing on Nora's shoulder, just as she took a step. She stumbled to the side, pouting at him, but Cinder ignored their byplay.

Instead, she was about to sidle up to Ranma side, but paused when she saw Ranma hugging Pyrrha around the waist. Instead she asked simply, "Why? Do you not like to socialize?"

"More like this isn't my society at all," Ranma replied dryly, causing Pyrrha to giggle. She really, **really** could not imagine Ranma in high society, which frankly made him all the more attractive to Pyrrha. The trappings of wealth and power that her father had so craved for so long, using her as leverage to enter that society, had never interested Pyrrha.

Cinder nodded at that, then looked over at Jaune. "I take it you are the team leader? Would you like to play a real game of chess? We might have time tonight, and I would wager that they have real chess set around here somewhere too."

Ranma didn't let Jaune answer, shaking his head with a sigh. "What is it with chess? I know Ozpin and Ironwoody both thought it was great, but I've never seen the appeal."

"This coming from the man who decided to replace the Knight, in our little game," Emerald taunted while Cinder's eyes narrowed ever so slightly at the name dropping, although she couldn't stop herself from a faint lip twitch at the 'Ironwoody' nickname. "If you don't like chess, why decide to play?"

"Because playing was better than sitting on the sidelines."

"And why a Knight? Is that how you see yourself, a Knight?" Cinder asked, as if she was getting in on the teasing.

But for some reason, Ranma thought that her words rang false and with a bit more interest than they should. Still, he replied all the same. "I've never seen myself as any chess piece really. Although I took the Knight because like I told the kids, I don't think I could move in a straight line to save my life."

Pyrrha began to snicker at that, shaking her head and leaning against Ranma's side in a way that had several nearby paparazzi snapping pictures. But right now, Pyrrha could not bring herself to care.

Although as Ranma replied, her smile slightly disappeared at the seriousness of his tone. "Never mind which piece you are, if you think in those terms, if you think of yourself as a piece, all you're doing is admitting you're a piece on someone else's board. I would rather make the rules of my own game, thanks."

Cinder's eyes widened at that, while Ranma turned his attention to Pyrrha, moving his arm up to her shoulders and leaning his head against hers. The others had already moved ahead of them heading for the buffet table. If they hadn't, one of them might have noticed a look of rage and annoyance flashing across her face.

As they broke off, from the younger group Lionheart allowed himself a faint smile at her reaction, but Cinder called him on it and glared at the man. "What is so funny?"

"Oh, just amused that that man's simple words seem to have caused you some pain. Did his words dent your worldview? After all, for all your power, you are still just a piece on **Her** board."

Cinder turned her glare on the man, reaching a hand up to touch his face very lightly. Even so, the man flinched away from that touch and her gaze. "If I am a piece, Lionheart what does that make you, Cowardly Lion? Or do you think that at this point Ozpin would welcome you back?"

He gulped, nodding his head once, then muttered, "There will be a meeting tonight about the mission, you'll be asked to attend."

"And even you do not know all of the details on it?"

"No," Lionheart grumbled, regaining some of his poise. "I am not as connected with the Mistral Council as much as Ozpin is in Vale. But I do know that our Hunters have been pulling in more jobs recently pushing out into one of the valleys on the border."

That was interesting and Cinder just nodded, realizing she would get more information this time from official channels rather than an unofficial one. Instead, she stepped away from the man, waving him off. "In that case, I will see you in the meeting. And remember Lionheart, who holds your leash."

Dismissed, the man moved away rapidly through the crowd. Cinder stood for a moment, looking around and wondering how best to spend her time before that meeting. She didn't think that trying to trail Ranma would do much good, and there was always the chance that Ranma would notice. And then, a slow beat song began, and Cinder decided that she wanted to have some fun, for once. With that she turned to take Emerald's hand. "Come on, I think, I would like to play."

Emerald had barely a moment to blush and stammer before Cinder had pulled her out onto the dance floor and into Cinder's arms.

Ranma and Pyrrha were already on the dance floor, and Ranma took a brief moment of inattention to wonder about their relationship, noting Cinder was somewhat amused as they danced, while Emerald was a blushing mess. But then his attention was back on Pyrrha, and he was smiling into her hair, smelling the cinnamon and jasmine scent of her, forgetting the two weird women and the crowd around them.

But after a few songs, a discrete cough from behind them made Ranma turn, reluctantly pulling away from a radiant-seeming Pyrrha. He frowned, then took a note from the serving person who had coughed, shaking his head as he noted that Jaune and Cinder were both getting similar messages, as were a few others in the crowd. "Looks like it's business time," Ranma muttered, letting his hands fall from Pyrrha's waist somewhat reluctantly. "Try to have fun without me, would you?"

Pyrrha sighed. "Somehow, I don't see that happening. Without you around, I don't have any protection from the jackals."

“Punch them in the teeth,” Ranma suggested unhelpfully. “Or grab Nora and retreat to the powder room.”

Pyrrha snickered at that, but didn't do so, watching as Jaune, who had been dancing with a few of the ladies, and had actually been impressing several of them with his mastery of the dance floor, moved off, joining Ranma. The two of them nodded to Cinder, who nodded in turn, as they met up with Lionheart and several others by the entrance to the main dance area.

Soon after leaving the others, they were all sitting down in what looked like a small amphitheater set up like the kind of rich man's personal movie theater that Ranma had seen in a few magazines occasionally. There, they met several others. All of them were men, some were gaunt, some were overweight, some were harried looking, and some cool and controlled. Regardless all of them tried to convey a sense of gravitas to them, of power and authority.

They failed in Ranma's case. The only impression he got was age.

“Ladies, gentlemen, Hunters, all. You all are here on a mission that we have attempted to keep secret in particular from Atlas and the SDC, as what we are going to be attempting to do is to break the SDC's monopoly of high-end Dust and Dust crystals.”

There were some mutters at that, and more than one of the Mistrali natives sat up abruptly, staring at the Councilman in interest. The biggest external demand that Mistral had, was Dust. Mistral only produced a few types of Dust on its own, and all in most small quantities. Not nearly enough to power their society. Because of this, they had been forced to ally with Atlas, the world's main producer of Dust, after the Color War wrecked much of Vacuo's sources. But it was very much a one-sided relationship.

Ranma watched as a map appeared on the large screen beyond the group of aged men at the front, showing a map of the continent. The continent itself was called Anima, and Mistral was, oddly enough, a very small portion of that continent, consisting of valleys of various sizes, and unlike what Pyrrha had told them, the river Mi'strach did connect them all, but it split off at several points, making the area very oddly shaped.

There were a few other valleys marked out here and there along the edge of the continent, self-sufficient areas that still answered to Mistral authority. Ranma understood that these areas, and the fact that most of the valleys themselves were almost semi-autonomous, was the source of what Pyrrha called the polyglot nature of the country. Some took after Greece or Rome. Others took after what Ranma would term Japan, and still more, Spain and China.

But each of those valleys was defensible, geographically speaking. They still had issues with Grimm inside their borders, but those Grimm, when they popped up, were normally young and easily defeated. The mountains protected those valleys along with anti-air cannons from the Grimm beyond, who were anything but young.

The video slowly moved down the main branch of the river until they were at the far end, well beyond the offshoot that led to the Valley of Nike, where Ranma knew Pyrrha's family had originally come from and which she still maintained was her natural home thanks to her grandfather. *I wonder if we'll be able to stop in? She would love that.*

However, beyond the valley that held last of those that were part of Mistral were two more. And in a third the video showed an aerial view of an ancient, destroyed city.

"This is the ancient city of Spartoi," the man in the center of the Council explained. "It has been devoid of life for hundreds of years, ever since the last great Grimm rising in 1,222."

Ranma could see why. This valley was at the end of the mountain range that protected the rest, opening up a series of jungles at the far end of the area around the city each of them slightly different from the other, thanks to the number of rivers that ran into or out of them. There was little to know natural defenses which made it the kind of no-man's-land that Ranma had seen numerous times in Vacuo, if far, far greener than anywhere in that blighted country.

"How high are those walls?" asked one of the Hunters leaders.

"Over fifty meters," one of the men supplied.

"Why are we interested in it?" another Hunter leader asked, one who had sat by Professor Lionheart.

"We had not been interested in it until recently. The Valley of Masada is one of the most easily defensible natural positions in Mistral. That's why people retreated from Spartoi in the first place. However, the reason the city grew to such a size was because there were nearby Dust deposits. Dust deposits, which we had long thought were run out."

"However, we were wrong," a fourth councilmember announced.

What followed was forty minutes of interminable information that Ranma could barely follow about mining types, scouts sent in and various metals being found in large quantities along with deposits of Fire, Ice and even Lightning Dust. Lightning Dust was extremely rare, and there were some mutters of excitement at that.

"This is all well and good," Cinder interjected, her tone almost like verbal sin as she spoke up for the first time in the meeting, staring at the map thoughtfully. "But the problems that led to Spartoi being abandoned also still exists. The area around it is too open to the rest of the continent, it's far too easy for Grimm from the rest of Anima to attack in droves at the slightest provocation. How do you expect to deal with that?"

"She's right, one of the under," Hunters said reluctantly, an older man around Glynda's age maybe. "We don't have enough Hunters to really patrol that wide an area, we'd have to

send cutting out expeditions, and those would be nasty. Hell, we have to clear the city first too, if you were intending to use it. And Spartoi fell, if my memory isn't playing tricks on me, to a horde of Lizardians, Montoads and various Arachnoids. The kind of Grimm that would be very hard to fight in a city environment."

"You're right that we do intend to use the city, we need a local area to store the mining and Dust refinement equipment, to say nothing of the housing for the workers needed to take advantage of these recent fines. However, we have been planning this for a while."

Several dozen aerial ships were shown after that, along with various other equipment, all of them of the type which could be used to throw up walls quickly or create trenches. "We're going to revive the old Colors War era method of defense. Ditches in depth, mines and walls backed by artillery. Indeed, most of the artillery are pieces built for that war."

"But we will need to have the area cleared of Grimm first. That will be your job," the central councilmember began again. "Enter the city, clear it of Grimm. Create a landing zone for our aerial forces, keep these areas clear until reinforcements arrived, then push forward with the workers as they go to work on creating the new defenses."

"This is a big job," Ranma spoke up now. "How long do you anticipate it taking? And what will we do about the various bandit groups that operate out there too?"

"We'll be expecting reinforcements from Vacuo, several dozen Hunter teams, to add to our own, as well as companies of infantry from our own militia."

That talk went on for a while, but Ranma ignored them, concentrating on the map and manipulating things for a bit. After a moment, he began to smile, a plan forming.

Elsewhere, Cinder also began to smile, a plan forming in her mind as well. *I do hope that Tyrian and Hazel are on the ball. If not... well, who knows who might be able to advantage of this...*

Ranma only began to pay attention once more when the council members began to speak about bringing along some news reporters. Before the man could even finish, Ranma had added his own voice to the clamor of, "Fuck no!"

But two of the councilmembers were serious about it, saying that "This is in fact the reason why we asked the Invincible Girl's team. We want to create some enthusiasm among the populace for this new job."

Ranma could actually understand that. After all, this mission was basically going to create a new settlement, and you wanted people enthusiastic and willing to go out to the

frontier. *Kind of like how in America, the whole Wild West thing had created such a move from East to West.* At least according to the history books that Ranma could remember anyway.

Regardless, Ranma had an obligation to Pyrrha and her team. "This is way too damn dangerous a mission to have civvies under foot.

Jaune instantly jumped forward to back him up. "Ranma's right. Bring in the reporters and newsies after-the-fact maybe, not before. Let us clear out the city, then start recording the work going on. That kind of motivational message would be good wouldn't it?" Jaune's voice dwindled under the glares of the Council members.

"No. That kind of thing would be alright, but nowhere near as good as seeing our Hunters, including our most famous warrior, in action." The councilmember's tone tried to indicate that this discussion was closed.

It didn't work. "But surely a visit to the dentist is better when they have access to Novocain," Ranma growled, holding up one hand and clenching it slowly. "Do you want to try it the other way?"

"Are you threatening us!?"

"Raise your hands if you want a bunch of reporters following around your every move when you're out in the field?" Ranma raised his voice, turning to everyone else in the room.

Not a single Hunter raised his or her hands, and Cinder even went so far as to add it is a vainglorious foolish idea. "Besides, we're all hunters here. We all know no one is truly invincible," she taunted gently.

"Besides, she's still a student, not a huntress, and at no point has she ever signed up for being the poster child for this plan of yours. Push it, and I will pull team JNPR out of this entirely," Ranma announced bluntly.

While his fellows blustered, one of the Councilman, who had previously been explain about the various mission to scout the area around Spartoi when a random Hunter band reported finding large deposits of Dust near the surface, held up a hand. "Is there room to negotiate here?"

"No," Ranma tone was still blunt. "We are not having this discussion. We will not be saddled with these reporters in the field! If you want to get a interviews afterword, or follow us around the city once it's cleared, that's one thing, like Jaune said. But not before. Frankly the whole thing smacks of ivory tower thinking that is just pathetic."

"Agreed," snorted one of the other hunters, an older man, somewhere in his 30s maybe, with a long scar running down his face obscuring one eye. "That would be a better idea, and

something my team would get behind. But we won't have reporters under foot while we're fighting for our lives."

"Mine as well," Cinder added, already working the later use of reporters into her plans.

With all the Hunters in the room backing him, Ranma was able to win the argument eventually and finally the councilmembers admitted defeat on this score. They did so reluctantly, and they insisted that the entire team give interviews, which Ranma couldn't budge them on. He did however make certain to schedule them for the afternoon of the next day because Pyrrha would be busy getting her new weapons in the morning.

That'll give us time to get the hell out of a dodge. After all, an agreement made in duress, isn't an agreement at all. And I still have an obligation as their teacher to make certain Jaune and the others don't get taken advantage of. And maybe, just maybe, we can go with my plan, and make retaking this city work all the faster.

Soon, the meeting began to break up and Jaune and Ranma hurried off to find their friends.

Back in the main party, Pyrrha had been completely pigeonholed by another group of the locals. Ren and Nora had attempted to protect them, but her father had basically taken her by the arm and led her away from her fellows to talk to people, trying to get her to agree to come back to the Gladiator Circuit when she was done at Beacon. That hadn't worked, but beyond holding that line, Pyrrha, without support had fallen back into her old habits of simply smiling and going along with things much to her father's happiness.

Out on the dance floor, Emerald was dancing with a few of the other rich and powerful, stealing more than a few of them blind but she broke off her when her scroll came in. She nonchalantly left the dance floor, noticing out of the corner of her eye that once more, Nikos was trying to find a polite way to tell someone that she wasn't interested in his product or something. *for someone with her reputation she's a bit of a wallflower socially, isn't she?*

Shaking her head, Emerald entered the powder room, locking the door behind her. There she found Cinder, smiling slightly at her. "How well do you think you could find this address, and then follow someone?" she asked, holding out the address to Thetis Ironworks.

"Findings it is easier Cinder, we've spent enough time here before that I know my way around. But following someone? Like the Azure Warden?"

"No, that would probably be a bad idea," Cinder amended. "Hmm... But could you put yourself in a position to watch if someone else was watching the house?"

Emerald nodded firmly. "That I could do."

“Good. I know that Hazel and Tyrian are in the area and are enacting their own plan against the Azure Warden. You’re not have contact with them or whoever they are using,” Cinder ordered seriously. Hazel was all right, indeed, Cinder rather got along with him, but he was incredibly loyal to Salem, and if he learned that Cinder was planning to perhaps run her own operation here, regardless of it possibly helping their faction, he would become an enemy. *The less said about Tyrian the better*, she thought with some amusement. “But I want to know what the Warden and JNPR are up to and what Hazel and Tyrian are up to as well.”

Emerald nodded, and the two women left the party soon after.

Back with the others, Ranma and Jaune had rejoined the party, and Ranma had seen what was going on around Pyrrha. The instant he did, Ranma decided he hated it. The fake smile, the fake look of interest, the eyes that seemed to have become dead glass instead of the lively green fire that Ranma had come to enjoy. *Right, that just isn't on, people*, Ranma thought grimly, his teeth bared in a snarl as he moved into the crowd, the look scaring several people away from approaching him.

“...I understand that this deal doesn't seem all that interesting to a student such as yourself, but later in life, the money will come in handy, especially if you intend to create a nonprofit organization to help the refugees of Grimm attacks as you said you did,” a man was saying.

Ranma instantly shoved his way through the crowd, uncaring that he knocked aside several of the locals, even causing one to splash herself with her own drink. Then he pretended not to notice when he trod down on Medeve's foot, even as he ground his heel into the top of the man's foot.

Then he was by Pyrrha, taking her arm in his, and pulling her away. “Sorry gentlemen, Beacon policy is never to sign or even verbally agree to anything without a Beacon approved lawyer's okay and you'll have to talk to Ozpin about that kind of thing.”

“Ozpin is all the way in Vale, the Invincible Girl is here now!” one of the men grumbled, but at Ranma's glare, the group, including the now pained Medeve backed away.

“Thank you!” Pyrrha murmured. “I, I tried to, well, stand up for myself at first, but I ...”

Ranma shook his head in reply, and soon they joined the others at the buffet table, and Ranma took up a glass of fruit punch, sniffing it quickly, then holding it out to Pyrrha. “It's just fruit punch, nothing alcoholic in it,”

Gratefully smiling at him, Pyrrha continued to try to apologize on having been pigeonholed. “I, my instincts are just to go along with things, and especially when my manager got involved. I tried to hold the line, but I was crumbling pretty quickly before you arrived.”

“You’ve just got to get used to saying no. Doing so more and more in the future will help,” Ranma soothed.

Nora agreed, throwing her arms around Pyrrha. She had found some crepe suzette things, and basically had been gorging herself on them. “Yeah, just think of it as if it’s a skill in an RPG. You need to level up your level of **‘No!’**”

Pyrrha laughed at that, while Ren and Jaune agreed, although Jaune pointed to Ranma. “Right, although I doubt you’ll ever get to ‘level 99: **I don’t care**’ that Ranma’s mastered.”

“That’s me,” Ranma smirked cheerily. “I’m just a hick from Vacuo who spent a few years out in the Grimm Lands. What do I care about society or who I offend?”

They all chuckled at that, but Ranma turned to Pyrrha asking seriously, “When do you think we can leave?”

“Normally, I’d wait for my manager to tell me when to leave but...” Pyrrha looked over at where Sally had been standing with a few of the other ladies. All of them had smirks on their faces and seemed to have been talking about something that, if the way they looked at the Hunters in the room was any indication, she didn’t want to think about it. Catching her mother’s eyes, Pyrrha jerked her head towards the doors leading out of the ballroom.

Sally frowned for a second, then shrugged as if to say, ‘do what you want’ and Pyrrha smiled happily. It was another sign and let her spread her wings way she to. Then the woman’s eyes seemed to flicker to the side, a frown appearing on her face.

“Pyrrha! There you are!” a deep, booming voice announced itself. The man who came with the voice was just as large, a youngish looking twenty-something man, with blonde hair, a handsome face and heavy tan, reminding Ranma almost of a picture Yang had shown him once of her dad, only a bit wider in the shoulders, and with a far more arrogant expression. He wore what looked like a Roman Legate’s outfit, complete with sword at his side and a tower shield on his back, although unlike a real Roman, his legs were covered by leather leggings with greaves on his legs and thighs. “I would have been here sooner, but I had a last-minute challenger to see off in the arena, you know how it is,” the man boomed, moving to push between Ranma and Pyrrha.

This failed, badly. As big and powerful as the guy seemed, he would have had to have a Semblance that helped his strength to push Ranma around even a little bit. Instead, he bounced a bit and frowned at Ranma. “Do you mind, little man, I am trying to talk to my destined one.”

“Achilles, I have told you before I do not believe in that tabloid nonsense. I would have thought through the times I defeated you would have made that plain,” Pyrrha shot back, and Ranma was grateful to see that some of her normal fire was back. This was a personal thing after all, not a social event.

“Ah but that is just because you believe in playing hard to get my dear, you know we are fated to be together,” the man exclaimed grandly and Ranma noticed that a lot of the people around them were now watching this minor confrontation. Most looked disapproving, some neutral, while a few actually smiled, as if they too believed the man’s words or at least were willing to look as if they did for their own reasons.

It was time, Ranma thought, to create a bit of smokescreen. “Personally, I’ve never believed in that fate crap,” he drawled. “I think we all make our own fates, and your mouth is starting to write a ‘destiny’ your ass can’t cash talking to my friend like that.”

“Hah, and who are you? Some Hunter who thinks that dealing with beasts is all that impressive? Manny a Hunter has learned on the sands of the arena that being able to kill beasts matters little against a man,” the large gladiator shot back, still shouting.

“Eesh, you got any volume other than maximum idiot?” Ranma shook his head, then turned away from the guy as he puffed himself up further. “This the Achilles guy you mentioned?” When Pyrrha nodded, Ranma smirked, a wide, infectious smirk that caused Jaune to gulp in anticipation. “Well, who am I to argue with tradition?”

That caused everyone who heard him to blink and by the time anyone had any idea what he meant, Ranma’s hands were already moving, striking at points on the man’s armor, a mix of Amaguriken and a trick he had learned from Happosai, using ki to weaken points in a person’s clothing. His hands moved so fast that even Pyrrha couldn’t follow them and then they were back, grabbing at his drink which hadn’t had any time to fall towards the ground.

A second later though, other things did begin to fall to the ground: Achilles’s armor came apart, and the man was suddenly left in nothing but his underwear, even his leather leggings coming apart. As everyone around him gasped in astonishment, Achilles looked down and stared. “Wh, what in the, how...”

“Well, I think we’ve seen all we can tonight,” Ranma drawled, getting a laugh from the others as he rapidly backed away from the other man. “Let’s get out of here.”

JNPR quickly agreed, and as the crowd around them started to react ever louder and ever more negatively to the sight of the nearly naked Achilles, they absconded, stage right.

Behind them, Achilles tried to grab at his pants, but they were in pieces, and all he could do was try to run away through the crowd while the men and women all around pointed and shouted in amusement. As he went, he stared over his shoulder to the equally retreated JNPR and Ranma. *Curse you, whoever you are, I will have my revenge!*

End Chapter 19, Episode 2

I am not honestly happy with the confrontation at the end of this, but frankly I think my desire to world build and my desire to play with the characters are kind of at loggerheads with this story. Still, I hope you all had a laugh with this.