

Burning everything I know

Desperate for a change

Crashing down the ancient roads

Past our yesterday

Fractures, Illenium

CHAPTER 1 (5.7K) (R.)

Trees tumbled and crashed to the dry earth as they were roughly torn apart, spraying chunks of dried mud and crackled leaves into the air. A long, double-headed body slithered through the dense overgrowth, crushing anything in its path in a chorus of almighty crunches and snaps. Its monochrome scaled body glowed in the glaring sun, some scales breaking off in its starved chase after its prey.

“Eat rocket!” Yang hollered, her hand grasping Blake’s tightly as she shot a rocket into the muzzle of the Alpha King Taijitu, the subsequent explosion booming out loud soon after the impact. The giant serpent recoiled and hissed as smoke and flames fell from it, fangs bared at the swinging targets in front of its snout. Yang smirked wide as Blake flung Gambol shroud through the air, using the ribbon as a makeshift slingshot.

Yang whooped in glee, shooting off another round of rockets from Ember Celica, accompanied by her euphoric giggle. The monster growled with all its might, shooting forward and striking the base of the tree that Blake had Gambol Shroud dug into and snapping the bark in half.

“Uh-oh.”

The tree fell with a groan, the weapon attached to it bringing Blake and Yang down with it.

“Brace!” Her partner called, the ground growing closer and closer.

The partners hit the ground hard, air knocked out of their lungs as their aura strained with the brunt hit. Blake recovered from the dive quickly, scrambling to her hands and feet in precise, catlike movements. She whipped the ribbon in her hand, the blackened steel blade flying through the air and finding its home back in her grip.

“Ow.” Yang groaned, rubbing the bump on the back of her head as she stood. She reached up and pulled twigs out of her hair as she returned to Blake’s side, “Man, I’m gonna be pulling leaves out of my hair all night.”

“It’s coming,” Blake said steadily, tensing her muscles as the first head of the monster appeared.

Hissing filled the clearing, one of the snake heads peering over the fallen oak. White scales reflected the midday sun, flame tinted eyes glaring down at them. Burns marred its face, adding to the scuffed scars running along its neck, proving just how long this Grimm had lived. It stood, poised with practiced talent, waiting to strike its prey.

“Where’s your twin?” Yang asked the serpent, glancing around for the other half. As if on cue, the black half revealed itself from the overgrowth, an angry gargle coming from its throat. It rose steadily behind them, Blake

turning to face it's towering height. Yang looked between the two grimm heads, clicking Ember Celica with uncertainty.

The King Taijitu moved first, both heads snapping forward in its attempt to grasp the huntresses. The two girls launched into the air, watching as the serpent heads crashed into each other with a hard *clack*, scales scraping off each other as they recoiled back. Yang smirked, grabbing Blake's outstretched bow and tugging it over her shoulder with a mighty tug. Blake swung in a tight circle, flying through the air and landing on the back of the black snake head in a display of perfect balance.

It reared back furiously, forcing the faunus to dig the sharpened end of her sheath into the creature's skull as it swung its heavy head around to try and shake off its pesky offender. Blake narrowed her eyes, driving the blade in her hand deep through one of the beady red eyes beneath her.

The monster let out a strangled cry, contorting in pain. Blake took this opportunity to swing herself and her black ribbon around the maw of the beast, landing back unsteadily on the top of its head. She wrapped the remains of the bow around her arm and pulled with all her strength, forcing the Grimm's jaw shut, leaving just enough space for its tongue to loll out. It growled again, dipping and diving its head. Blake's eyes widened with a yelp as the snake head slammed off a tree, her ears pressed flat against her head as she held on for dear life.

Meanwhile, Yang found herself staring down the maw of the opposite end, unloading rounds of fire into the back of its throat remorselessly. "Eat. This. You. Giant. Pain. In. The. Ass!"

A choked, angry hiss erupted from the back of the snake's throat as it raised its head back high, pointing its head straight up and unhinging its jaw further. Yang's grip faltered, her eyes widening at the realization she was about to slip into the jaws of the Grimm.

"You want to eat me? Alright, but I'm warning ya, I'M SPICY-" Yang roared, letting go of her faltering grip on its lip and jumping straight into the bottomless, dark esophagus of the slithering creature. The King Taijitu snapped its mouth shut immediately, cutting Yang off from the outside world with a growl.

Blake looked up from her own struggle as the previously occupied white head inched closer, its jaw open in an angry hiss. The faunus scanned around briefly for Yang, prompting concern to pool in the pit of her stomach when she realised her partner was nowhere to be seen.

"Yang?!" She cried. The head beneath her boots flicked roughly, taking advantage of its distracted attacker to finally throw her off. Blake stumbled, her grip on the bladed sheath of Gambol Shroud completely lost. She swung off the top of the head with a yelp, the black material unravelling from her forearm as she fell.

The muzzle came loose, the black head whipping around instantly to try and bite the feline midair in an attempt to finish her. Blake squeaked, activating her semblance in combination with the Dust she was carrying. A stone copy of her form appeared out of thin air; she sacrificed her new copy as a platform to push herself away from the angry reptile.

Landing on the grass with a soft thud, Blake watched wide-eyed as the black Taijitu tore her rock form into chunks with a single bite of its powerful jaws. Her stone head fell to the ground in front of her, cracking in half on the grass down the middle, her petrified look staring emptily back at her. Blake cringed in discomfort, looking up to see

both heads returning her gaze, poised and ready to strike. She took on their unspoken challenge and steeled herself, hands gripped tightly on the blade of Gambol Shroud as it shifted into its auto-fire mode.

That's when she noticed the white head's mouth oozing smoke.

"Oh," She said to herself, the white head faltering as it too realised the unpleasant feeling in its mouth, "*That's* where you went."

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Yang grunted as she dug her fingers into whatever purchase they could grip, nails digging into slimy, pulsing flesh in the Taijitu's throat. She used her shotgun shots to propel herself upwards bit by bit, before returning her clawed death grip into the dark, smoky flesh of the grimm. The meat beneath her fingers was rough, and almost foggy, black mist floating into her face. The walls around Yang closed tighter as the serpent moved around, practically squishing the blonde between them like a sandwich. Her face pressed into the mucus lining of its throat, coating it in a thick, slimy yellow layer of slime and earning a disgusted "Eugh!" from inside.

"Time to get out of here-" Yang said to no-one in particular, reloading her slime-coated gauntlets with a dull click. She let loose in the beast's neck, rockets and shotgun pellets flew from her wrists and exploded in the pit of its stomach. Black smoke began to rise from the darkness below, a heavy rotting stink following it. Yang gagged, holding her breath and lifting her wrist to cover her nose.

The white head began to heave, the walls around the blonde contracting tightly. Yang felt panic pull lightly at her stomach, reaching her hand up as far as it could go and grabbing. Her fist tightened around the base of the tongue, squeezing it tightly and tugging on it to hoist herself free of the constricting death trap. The Grimm hissed, its throat lifting the pressure and giving Yang a moment to escape.

Her eyes turned crimson, her hair crackling to life in a ball of flame, and suddenly she was rocketing out of the monster's maw like a cannonball. She landed on the ground, sliding along on her feet. The slime beneath her boots made her slip, landing on her back with a hollow cough and a whoosh of her flames extinguishing.

"Eww! I'm completely covered in snake goo!" she protested, kicking herself off the ground.

Blake stood not too far away, staring at her partner in mild disbelief.

“What did you think was going to happen?”

“That’s the thing, Blakey!” The feline frowned at the pet name, “I *don’t* think!”

“Please don’t call me that.”

A loud, dangerous growl interrupted their banter, pulling the bee pair’s attention back to the Grimm that was miraculously still alive despite Yang’s flamboyant exit. While the white half appeared severely weakened, its mouth hanging open loosely with a constant stream of sparking smoke drifting from it. The black half had a look of enagement in its eyes, fed up with the toying around it was experiencing. Its single eye glowed brightly, as did the red markings across the top of its head. Yang and Blake crossed glances for a minute.

In their moment of unawareness, the black side struck, its sleek head bolting through the air like black lightning. Blake reacted a second too late, golden eyes flashing wide in shock as she faced the throat of the King Taijitu. Yang’s body suddenly blocked her vision, exposing her back as strong as she wrapped her arms around her partner in an attempt to block any incoming damage.

A swift rose scented wind suddenly filled the clearing, a colossal chunk of ice seemingly appearing out of nowhere and smashing into the side of the serpent’s head. It hissed painfully, rolling to the ground and lying there for a moment, before rising up again to glare at whatever had attacked it.

It opened its mouth to hiss. However, a well-aimed sniper round hit one of its fangs instead, cracking it in half with a single shot. It fell to the ground, remaining there for a second before fading to black mist.

Yang released Blake slowly in surprise, looking up to see what had even hit the grimm. Blake lifted her head from Yang’s chest to look as well, both of them noticing the first half of the team standing nearby, weapons aimed towards the monster. Ruby pulled Crescent Rose out from the ground, round silver eyes wide at the sight of the Grimm before them.

“It’s huge!” she gasped, stabbing the spike of Crescent Rose into the earth beside her. The weapon towered over her by several feet, dwarfing her immediately. The weapon even looked light in her hand, but the only other person who could lift it other than Ruby was Pyrrha.

“Thanks for the save!” Yang bellowed over, throwing a thumbs up over to the other pair as Blake finally escaped her arms. Weiss rolled her eyes.

“You wouldn’t have needed saving if you weren’t too busy *flirting* with your partner!” she snapped, her chilliness frosting on her words..

“Right back at you, Princess!” Yang winked.

Weiss’ nostrils flared, already frustrated at the elder sibling. The lack of response only fueled the blonde’s fire, a quiet chuckle coming from the opposite side of the field. Ruby blushed at the comment, thanking the Gods that they were still sheltered beneath the shade of the oak trees.

“You two can fight later,” Blake’s monotone voice broke the silence, eyes trained on the waking grimm, “Our friend still isn’t finished.”

The snake lifted both its heads, the white half shifting its attention from it’s black counterpart towards Ruby and Weiss, while the black half locked onto Blake and Yang, eager to finish off the job on the puny creatures that had almost killed its other half.

“Ruby, what’s the plan?!” Yang asked, hopping out of the way as the black head struck again, punching the side of its mouth with a sharp thwack that made Yang’s knuckles ache. She pulled her hand back, waving it around in the air to dispel the pain.

Blake flipped over its head, reclaiming the sheath of Gambol shroud as she did so. It slid out of its now blind eye with a pained shriek, turning and aiming for Blake with another strike. Blake faded out of the way again, the serpent crunching down on a shadow clone again.

Ruby jumped out of the way of the white half as it struck towards her, shooting twice into the side of its face while Weiss used her glyphs to summon chunks of earth from her Dust and hit its weak spots. It wavered under each chunk of earth, pushing through with it’s colossal strength and going for the white haired heiress. Weiss jumped out of it’s reach in a show of elegance, landing behind it to continue her barrage.

“We need to separate the heads! Stretch it out as much as you can!” Ruby ordered, reaching for another round of ammo from her back pocket as she gained distance from herself and her attacker.

Beside her, Weiss came to life again, racing along a line of well-placed glyphs to get behind the white head. She moved smoothly, a dome of her sigils appearing around the viper as she planned her attack. She played strategies over and over in her mind, flipping out of the way of an attempted coil and onto an awaiting glyph.

She flew down, the tip of her rapier striking its scaled form. The snake hissed again, moving to try and catch the white blur around it. Instead, it only bit down on air as another strike slashed its eyes. It snarled as the onslaught continued, jerking with each hit as its scales began to break.

“Leave some for me!” Ruby dove in, sliding under the serpent’s neck with the help of a glyph from Weiss. She hooked the blade of her weapon under the lip of the white head and shot a bullet, tearing it off with a swing.

The now jawless half reared its head back with an agonized wheeze, smacking Ruby in the process. The leader yelped in surprise, crashing into Weiss on her way down. The two collided with a thump that sent them both to the ground. Weiss managed to crouch mid-air and land on her feet, unlike Ruby, who took a mouthful of dirt to the face.

“You need to be more aware of its movements,” she scolded, a hand landing on her hip as she turned to help the crimsonette up. Ruby dusted herself off, spitting the soil and grass from her mouth with a cackle.

“I know, I know– W-Watch out!” Ruby bumped Weiss out of the way, knocking them both to the ground again as the black half shot towards where they had been standing just a second earlier.

“Get back here you!” Yang roared, hands beneath the lips of the reptile as she tried to pull its head back from on top as if she was riding a bull. The black head swung around madly, smacking into a tree and cracking it in half before continuing deeper into the woods.

Blake followed quickly behind as the black half tunneled into the forest with Yang on its head, the raven-haired faunus stopping briefly to gaze at the heap Weiss and Ruby were in, before smirking knowingly and following swiftly after her partner.

“Owie-” Ruby whined, her aura already actively healing the small scrapes and scuffs on her elbows and knees. “Are you okay W-...eiss?” Ruby froze up, hands planted on either side of Weiss’ head.

The Schnee beneath her groaned, sapphire eyes looking up and staring at Ruby in shock. Her hands were splayed out on either side of her, Myrtenaster having fallen during the scuffle. Her bangs shaded her face, her coat drifted back

to expose her chest. Ruby couldn't see a single blemish on her silky skin, her collarbones carved and pristine. A thin layer of sweat was glazed over her skin from the heat of the forest.

She looked so *helpless* like this.

Ruby suddenly lost all the strength in her arms, gulping as a bright red flush burned her face, "U-uh."

"Well?" Weiss prompted, "Are you going to get off of me?"

"Yep! Yes-" Ruby shook her head, blinking away the stars in her eyes, "I am getting off now." Ruby clumsily scrambled back onto her feet. Weiss pulled herself from beneath the reaper.

"To answer your earlier question, yes, I am fine. Thank you," Weiss hummed, dusting off grass that stuck to her and pulling her coat back over her shoulders. Ruby nodded, standing oddly straight.

"Y-Yep! No problem, partner! *Haha...*" Ruby chirped awkwardly, flicking Crescent Rose back up from the dirt with her heel, "Now let's go kick some Taijitu booty!"

A certain hissing answered Ruby's comment, red eyes glaring at them through smoke that rose from its throat and missing jaw. Suddenly tense and ready for action again, Ruby and Weiss shifted their footing, weapons raised towards the creature as they waited for it to move, and it did.

The pair dived out of the way of the white snake as it lunged for them, glyphs shining beneath their boots as Weiss worked her semblance. The injured Grimm slammed head-first into the ground, too tired to stop itself fully after lunging for them. Its extended fangs got caught in the dirt, sinking deep into it up to its gums, jamming the serpent in place.

Weiss, thinking quickly, spun the revolver in Myrtenaster, locking onto the ice cartridge, a blue glow reverberating along the runes of the cool blade. "Ruby! Ice Flower!"

"Great idea, Weiss!" Ruby swung Crescent Rose forward and loaded a high caliber round. She watched in awe as the glyphs formed in front of the barrel, counting them as they appeared and waiting for the right moment. She could feel Weiss' chest rising and falling steadily as she focused her breathing, sending goosebumps along her arms.

“Hmph, of course it was.” Weiss hummed, a smile appearing. “It was my idea.”

Ruby smirked and fired her sniper, several icy chunks hitting the snake’s head and the area around it. Each load formed another, bigger chunk of ice like flowers, until the Grimm’s head was fully encased in it, effectively trapping it on the spot. Then, she ground her heel into the dirt, firing off a round from Crescent Rose and moving into a rapidly swirling blade, just like her uncle had shown her. The taijitu tried to squirm away as it faced it’s impending doom, wild red eyes watching Ruby as she moved through the air like a bullet. The ice cracked, but not until Ruby had started spinning, the steel blade of her scythe slicing clean through the snake’s weakened head, cleaving it in two.

The monster let out a pained howl as Ruby landed the opposite side, throwing Crescent Rose into the earth so that she could use it as a platform to land on. The stock of her weapon caught her, and the two stood and watched as the white head disintegrated, leaving a trail that led back to its other half.

Weiss lowered Myrtenaster. “And that’s that.”

Ruby folded up Crescent Rose, clasping it to the clip on her lower back. “Woo! Great teamwork Weiss!”

Weiss smirked, sheathing Myrtenaster temporarily. “Now, let’s hurry up and make sure your dunce of a sister hasn’t been eaten yet.”

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“Yang! Let go!” Blake called to the flaming blonde perched on the snake's head, who was being flung like a rag doll.

“Not. Until. He. STOPS!” Yang slammed her fist into its nose one final time, shotgun pellets finally breaking the toughened scales and going through the creature's jaw with a crack. It screeched loudly and swung roughly one more time, finally throwing Yang to the ground beside Blake. The snake hissed, its nostrils now smoking black. Yang cocked her gauntlets again, a frown on her face.

“It won't die!” She groaned.

“You need to behead it, or else it won’t,” Blake explained, “We learned this last week in Professor Port’s class.”

“Yeah, but that’s no *fun*.”

Blake rolled her eyes at her partner, looking up as Ruby and Weiss appeared through the overgrowth. Yang waved them down, shooting another rocket into the black snout that lunged at her.

“Hey love birds, you missed me playing grimm rodeo with our friend here” she smirked proudly as they got closer. “I won.”

Weiss huffed, slowing to a jog, “Well, your sister seems fine.”

“You did?” Ruby responded, ignoring Weiss’ earlier comment while Blake gave Yang an amused side-glare. Yang clicked her gauntlets in response.

“Weiss, what’s the quickest way to kill this thing?” Blake asked, eyes trained on the grimm. It was dazed from Yang’s prior attack, but it wouldn’t be for long. The heiress hummed, pinching her chin as she studied the monster.

“You need to break the scales at the base of its neck first,” Weiss pointed out as the snake began to rise up again, mist still rising from its nose, “Especially on an Alpha. They have hardened necks.”

“Yang?” Ruby called, folding out her weapon to its full size again. The blonde nodded, giving her little sister a thumbs up.

“Break the scales, gotcha!” She changed Ember Celica to melee combat mode, looking at the white haired member of her team, “Think you can help me out, Ice Queen?”

“Yes, but *only* because if I don’t, we’ll miss the pick up, and I am in desperate need of a shower,” the heiress lifted her hand, a circle of glowing glyphs appearing around the snake head, “I’m ready when you are.”

“Blake, can you cover Weiss?” Ruby asked, the tanned girl already moving into position next to the Schnee.

“You don’t need to ask.” Blake replied, placing the sheath back over her shoulder as she changed her weapon from its main blade into the alternate gun and katana. She moved to stand in front of their supporting member of the team, getting an appreciative nod from Weiss.

The King Taijitu hissed, almost as if it was challenging them to fight him. Ruby looked up towards it with a determined look on her face, its tongue flicking as it stalled, waiting for the right moment to strike. Ruby’s eyes were fierce, taunting the Alpha to up its game. It hissed louder, shooting back a venomous glare as it arched.

“GO!” Ruby ordered as the serpent went for her.

It missed Ruby by a hair, grabbing a mouthful of roses instead. Ruby sprinted away, leaving a burst of petals in her wake that blew in the wind. The beast turned to pursue the fleeing, red shape only to be interrupted by a hard punch beneath its eye, knocking it off course. The beast shrieked, turning to face its aggressor to be met with another punch to the opposite side of its neck. Scales were sent flying under the brute force of each hit, more and more progressively dislodging from the Taijitu’s skin.

“Over here!” Yang teased, launching from Weiss’ glyph again and going for its throat. The Grimm hissed, lifting its head to look around again. It quickly spotted the monochrome duo standing still nearby, disinterested by the fruitless attempt to grab Yang with her enhanced speed.

Weiss was straining under the unaccustomed weight on her semblance. Although her aura pool had grown, she’d trained only carrying her own weight on her semblance. Yang weighed almost double her, and every new glyph strained under her aura. She wouldn’t be able to keep this maneuver up much longer, especially once she dipped beneath the halfway point. She eyed her aura bar on her scroll that attached to her wrist, looking back up to notice red eyes staring at her. The snake shot forward, tongue flicking with excitement. Bullets from Blake bounced off its scales, its maw opening wide as it got closer.

Blake narrowed her eyes with a scowl, turning and hooking an arm under Weiss to move her. “Hold on!”

Weiss yelped in surprise as Blake launched into the air, dropping Yang accidentally as her focus on her semblance shattered. The faunus jumped up a tall oak tree, scrambling up the tree branches with her ribbon with Weiss still over her shoulder. The Taijitu followed them up, growing taller in the trees as it balanced itself on its strong body.

Weiss grumbled, reaching forward and summoning three more black glyphs around the snake. They locked around its head and neck, freezing it mid-air with its jaw locked open. She grunted as it squirmed to get free, a wind carrying the smell of roses suddenly appearing around them.

Ruby appeared, boots gripping onto a tree as she tensed her legs. The Grimm turned its eye to look at Ruby, realization flashing its crimson glare. Ruby smiled, grip tightening on Crescent Rose.

She shot from the tree, denting the bark as she launched. The curved blade caught the weakened scales of the Grimm, halting briefly as she met bone. With a single swing, Crescent Rose tore through the flesh, decapitating the Emperor Taijitu cleanly. Its dying screech ripped through the forest, before it began to dissipate into nothing but black fumes.

Weiss dispelled her glyphs with a gasp, the body of the serpent hitting the ground in two separate parts. Yang whistled, kicking the exposed neck with her foot, “And that, ladies, is how you separate conjoined twins, RWBY style!”

Weiss and Blake hopped down from the trees, reuniting with the two sisters on the forest ground. Ruby smirked, taking out her scroll and snapping a quick selfie of her kill with the team.

“That’s one way to put it,” Blake hummed, placing Gambol Shroud back into its sheath on her back.

“Yang- what on Remnant are you covered in?” Weiss asked, disgusted eyes watching as the blonde wiped some of the slime from her time inside the Taijitu off and flicked it onto the grass.

The blonde stared at Weiss in confusion, before looking back down at herself and changing her expression to one of pure mischief, directed at the heiress. She wiped a handful of snake goo from her leg before flinging it at the girl, “Oh- It’s throat mucus. Here, have some!”

Weiss gagged as the cold, slimy fluid landed on her, coating her face and neck in it. She tried to wipe it from her skin, finding it to be sticky and foul smelling, “YANG- I swear- I’ll replace your shampoo with hair remover- *so help me!*”

Yang gasped loudly, pausing in her next attack, “*You wouldn’t.*”

“*I can and I will.*”

“Okay gang, let’s rendezvous with JNPR and go ho-” Ruby turned, immediately noticing the threatening looks Weiss and Yang were giving each other, and then the thick transparent sludge that covered both of them, “*Ew*- what is that?”

“It’s-”

“It’s throat slime from the Taijitu!” Yang said triumphantly over Weiss, grinning, “Pretty sure it was trying to digest me in there- but hey! I’m alive and it’s dead so who cares?”

“Yang was eaten,” Blake explained, tightening her bow back over her cat ears as they began to walk towards the rendezvous point. Ruby’s eyes widened, starting over at Yang.

“You were *eaten*?!” she asked, excitement lacing her voice. Yang nodded her head proudly, stretching out her back so she stood tall and clearing her throat as she geared up to tell the tale. Weiss grumbled. It was going to be a long hike back.

“So there I was,” Yang began, lowering her voice, “Running for my life with the Emperor Taijitu on my tail!”

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“And that’s how I survived being eaten alive by the *strongest* grimm in the Emerald Forest!”

Ruby gasped, stars glowing in her eyes, “That’s so cool! I didn’t know the inside of a grimm had like, flesh and stuff.”

Weiss rolled her eyes, still desperately trying to clean the slime Yang threw at her from her pale skin with a handkerchief, “And then Ruby and I had to save you from it, remember?”

Blake giggled softly as Yang’s expression fell from proud to knowing she had been called out. She corrected herself, clearing her throat, “Y-yeah! Then the super cool couple that were probably making-out-before-they-came-to-rescue-us arrived! And then-”

“*YANG!*” Ruby blurted, punching her older sister roughly in the shoulder, “We were not making out!”

“Were too.”

“WERE NOT!”

“That’s not what Blake told me, isn’t that right Blakey?” Yang teased, throwing her arm around the Faunus’ shoulders unexpectedly. Blake jumped at the sudden closeness, looking up from her scroll with a confused smile.

“And what exactly did Blake tell you?” Weiss pitched in, just as annoyed at Yang’s teasing as Ruby was. Judging by the shit-eating grin that grew on her, it wasn’t going to get any better.

“Blake here told me she saw you two in a certain position on the ground in the middle of the fight!” Yang laughed.

Ruby and Weiss immediately turned red, embarrassed at the accusation. Yang’s giggles only got louder at the sight of the flustered pair

“You don’t have to keep your *relationship* a secret around us. No team secrets, remember?” Blake prodded, earning another loud snort from Yang as they broke the forest edge. Weiss rolled her eyes, shaking her head with an annoyed sigh as she moved further ahead. Ruby watched after her with a look of despair, before looking to Yang with an annoyed stare.

“Now you’ve done it,” Ruby grumbled, jogging to catch up with her snow-haired partner. She could practically sense the humiliation rolling off the Schnee in waves, the girl was grumbling under her breath as Ruby caught up. She couldn’t blame her, Yang’s teasing could cross boundaries sometimes if she wasn’t stopped.

“Weiss...Hey, don’t take it personally. It’s *Yang*, you know she’s only joking...” Ruby sighed, her blush starting to fade away, “How was the fight? You’re not hurt, are you?”

“I’m fine,” Weiss replied coldly, not meeting Ruby’s worried gaze as they got closer to the ruins where the extraction point was. The rose themed girl took that as her cue to drop the subject, knowing from experience that if she pushed Weiss any further, she would be on the receiving end of a Weiss centered blizzard.

“I’ll leave you alone for awhile,” Ruby hummed sadly, spotting the silhouettes of JNPR nearby, already waiting for them. She hesitantly looked back at her platinum haired partner for a last time, before shifting into a light jog and raising her hand in a wave to catch the other team’s attention, “Hey you guys!”

Weiss lifted her head at the sound, watching after Ruby as she jogged away. She didn’t mean to snap at Ruby like she had, but relentless aches and pains throbbed across her body, her low aura pool slowly taking a toll on her. Her knees wobbled dangerously as she walked across rough terrain, exhaustion tugging at her eyes. She was already exhausted, having used almost triple the amount of aura the rest of her teammates had. That fact alone annoyed her, and Yang’s teasing had only fed that annoyed attitude like logs on an open fire.

She sighed and ignored the warning beeps from her scroll as she hit the red section of her aura. She’d make a note to apologise to Ruby later, just right now she wanted to rest.

“Ruby! There you guys are!” Jaune shifted off an old ruin pillar as Ruby came to a stop near them, relief written on his features, “We were starting to get worried.”

“Psh, us missing a pickup? Nah,” Ruby waved her hand in the air dismissively, “Plus, if we did, Weiss would kill me.”

“True,” Jaune laughed, his hand reaching back to scratch at the base of his head. Ruby smiled. She liked Jaune. He was a good leader; caring, compassionate, although admittedly a bit lacking in the combat skills field. Last she heard, Pyrrha had been helping him in that regard, passing on skills from her own 1v1 training sessions whenever they had the chance.

“How did your mission go?” Pyrrha asked from nearby as the remaining trio from RWBY caught up.

“Fantastic!” Yang spoke up, placing her hands onto both her hips with a sick crunching and crackling noise as the slime began to harden and flake in the baking sunlight, “We killed the Emperor Taijitu- not a problem for team RWBY!”

A loud, high pitched gasp revealed where Nora had been hiding. The ginger haired girl jumped out from behind Jaune at the sound of Emperor Taijitu, a challenging look in her eyes as she searched for Yang.

“Well *we* cleared out an entire Ursa den!” she bragged, hands on her hips as she rose to meet Yang’s stare, “The thing was *huuuuge*! Like, gigantic!”

Yang decided to take her up on that challenge, electricity already flying between the two, “Oh yeah? Well this thing *ate* me- and then I blew it up from the inside!”

“False,” Blake commented somewhere behind her partner, having pulled out a book to read on her scroll whilst they waited for the airship. “It spat you out, Weiss and Ruby killed it.”

“Oh *YEAH*?! Well, this Ursa had my head in its *mouth*, so I ripped its jaw in half!” Nora retorted, taking a step closer to Yang, her hands clawing as she repeated the action.

“That’s incorrect. Pyrrha saved you.” Ren said nearby, picking clumps of black fur from the extending mechanism of his weapons, well accustomed to Nora’s nature to exaggerate, “You shouldn’t lie, Nora.”

“OH YEAH- Well I rode the black half into the woods! Didn’t let go once!” Yang took a step closer to Nora, their foreheads practically pressing against each other.

“*OH YEAH?!*”

“*YEAH.*”

“Enough already!” Weiss groaned, rubbing the bridge of her nose as a headache began to form, “We get it! You’re both *idiots*.”

A small round of laughter came from the teams at Weiss’ snarky comment, the heiress herself brushing her ponytail out with her fingers. Nora and Yang continued their war despite her comment, making up weirder and weirder feats in order to one-up each other. Ruby relaxed with a breath, folding her arms over her chest as she basked in the warm light of the sun. The clearing provided no shade other than the shadows cast by the broken pillars, but they weren’t expected to stay out for long.

Pyrrha giggled lightly as she came to a rest beside the younger team leader, looking down to Ruby with a smile, “How did everything go?”

Ruby hummed, stretching her arms above her head with a yawn, “Pretty good, nobody was hurt- Well, I mean, Yang was swallowed, but she seems fine, so.”

Pyrrha cocked a gentle eyebrow, “I meant your offer to bring Weiss on a da-”

“Uh!” Ruby jumped to silence the warrior by placing a hand against her mouth, glancing over her shoulder in horror to make sure Weiss hadn’t heard Pyrrha’s words. The heiress was picking leaves out of her hair nearby, oblivious to the conversation. Ruby sighed in relief, looking back up Pyrrha as she dropped her hands. The woman looked back with a look of confusion.

“I didn’t get to ask her,” Ruby mumbled, looking away from her friends as her cheeks flushed red.

Pyrrha frowned slightly, chancing a glance at Weiss before her eyes drifted back to Ruby, a glow of support lighting her emerald eyes, “I’m sure you’ll find the courage to do it soon. Are you still afraid of asking her?”

Ruby nodded, peering up at the treetops, “Yeah... Yang’s not helping though. Her teasing is starting to get annoying, I wish I hadn’t told her.”

Pyrrha chuckled warmly, looking over to the named girl with a smirk, “I’m sure Yang means well, Ruby. She’s just being an older sister.”

The red caped girl huffed, groaning slightly in protest to Pyrrha’s words, “I think she just wants to see me suffer...”

Pyrrha laughed, “Now, I wouldn’t say that. Just keep at it. I’m sure you’ll get your opportunity soon.” She turned her head upward, glancing up to the sky as the rumble of an engine was heard, the black form of the airship soon looming over the treetops, “There’s our ride.”

“Finally,” Weiss grumbled, pushing herself up from a broken pillar she had been leaning against.

The airship sank below treetop height, kicking up loose grass and sticks from their surroundings as it got closer. Once it finally touched down, the wind lessened and dissipated entirely when the engines died off. The bay door opened with a hiss, a first-aid woman standing at the entrance as a precautionary matter. Tall, white horns peaked from beneath blonde hair.

“Everyone alright?” The woman asked, a red and white visor covering most of her face, as well as a black mesh over her mouth for hygiene. Ruby waited as the others got on, watching Weiss carefully. The heiress steadied herself against the pillar she was lying against, her knees quivering beneath her momentarily as she balanced herself again. A worried frown formed on Ruby’s lips at the sight, looking away as Weiss looked back up again.

“We’re all spic and span, thank you Nurse!” piped up Yang, as she opened her locker and began to throw all her gear into it, “Nothin’ but snake mucus and good spirits here!”

Ruby hummed in response to her sister's words, jumping up onto the ship herself. She looked at the nurse and gave a subtle nod towards her partner, which the well tuned woman caught easily. She nodded back, closing the door behind her as Ruby headed to her own locker.

“I’m just going to make sure; aura strain can be dangerous if ignored. I’m jealous of huntresses like you, being able to work in such heat is hard!” She said, grabbing her medical pack and beginning to look at Ren, who’d already put all his gear in his weapon locker.

Ruby let out a breath of relief, resting her baby against the locker wall before placing her leftover ammo beside it. She heard the ship come to life around her, a sign she needed to hurry up and get strapped in. She locked her weapon away, before turning and finding Weiss sitting alone.

Ruby frowned, moving to sit beside her partner. Weiss tiredly looked up as Ruby sat beside her, words edging on her tongue, before just deciding to swallow her pride and say nothing. She sighed, leaning back into the wall and closing her eyes again. These damned seats were so uncomfortable sometimes.

“You can lean on me if you want.”

Weiss opened her eyes at the sound of Ruby’s offer, leaning forward with a dull ache in her body. She was desperate for any type of sleep, enough to not care how she got it, “Are you sure?”

Ruby’s eyes widened at the heiress’ response, causing an unimpressed frown to grow on her face.

“I-I mean- Of course you can? You’re tired, aren’t you? I-uh- don’t mind?” Ruby stammered, before a wave of seriousness came over her, “Um- You do look exhausted though, Weiss. You should sleep if you can.”

Weiss watched Ruby for a moment, weighing her options. She could risk being teased by Yang again, or sleep and wake up with a cramp in her neck...

She’d get over the teasing sooner than the cramp.

“Then I’ll take you up on your offer,” Weiss grumbled, shifting herself so that she could comfortably lean against Ruby’s shoulder. She slowly lowered her head, a blush forming on her face as she was greeted by Ruby’s increasing heartbeat. She sighed, relaxing her tense muscles.

This *was* much better.

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CHAPTER 2 (5.2k) (R.)

“Okay Class, what do we know about the impact of Dust on the human body?”

Weiss sighed heavily, her shoulders slouching as she leaned back in her chair. Dust Chemistry was a class she’d much rather not take, especially considering she was the next in line for the biggest Dust refinement company on Remnant. She already knew everything she needed to about elemental formulas in Dust by the time she was seven. This class would’ve been more suited to be a studying period for her, however she knew that this class was mandatory for her year.

“Hey, Weiss?” Ruby whispered, drawing the Schnee’s dwindling attention from the professor to her partner.

“Hm?”

“Can people burn from the inside out if you stabbed them with fire dust?”

Weiss huffed, “Don’t be ridiculous. Fire needs oxygen to burn, and there wouldn’t be sufficient oxygen in your body for the fire to combust. The only way such an event could happen is in the rare case you got fire Dust into your lungs; however, the stab wound itself would be more likely to kill you first, rather than the fire.”

Ruby blinked, Weiss’s words lost to her, “Uh.. Can you explain that to me in English?”

“Miss Rose,” Ruby straightened up immediately as Professor Ebony called her name, silver eyes darting to the front of the class. The teacher was staring at her expectantly, foot tapping the floor. Ruby gulped, glancing to Weiss for help, who, in turn, only shrugged.

“Y-yeah?”

“Miss Rose! As knowledgeable as Miss Schnee may be, she is not your professor. Eyes down here from now on pleas,” she spoke softly. Ruby bowed her head in slight humiliation.

“Sorry...”

Professor Ebony was one of the nicer teachers in the school, being a mother of two. Her motherly instincts sometimes bled into class time, but nobody ever complained. In the rare case where it did, it was refreshing, sometimes even comforting.

Weiss sighed. Being around such a motherly figure could be hard, to say the least. Professor Ebony had tried, on multiple occasions, to start a conversation with her before class, and while, she had been pleasant, the idea of a pleasant mother made Weiss extremely uncomfortable considering her own was... not so keen on showing any form of kindness.

“As I was saying,” The professor turned to point at a simple drawing of a body on the blackboard, “The human body is made up of two simple parts. The body itself”

She quickly drew a circle in the chest with blue chalk, “...and the soul.”

“Everybody has a different soul, as demonstrated by the color of our aura. While one of you may have a green colored aura, another may have a red aura, or a blue aura. It protects us, helps us to unlock and bring forth our semblances. It is unique to every one of us. Aura also activates the dust we use in our weapons.

“Now, you’re probably wondering how this is related to the effect of Dust on our bodies,” some students nodded at the statement, pens in their hands. Weiss looked over to Ruby, who was busy drawing in the corner of her book. The heiress frowned, handing Ruby the notes she had already written.

“If you’re not going to pay attention, copy those down. They’ll help you when it comes to revision.” Weiss whispered, not taking her eyes off the presentation in front of her. Ruby’s eyes gleamed with appreciation for a moment, opening her mouth to say something. Her jaw hung open, before deciding against saying anything, beginning to copy the tedious amount of notes quietly..

“Dust is made up of several chemicals, as you know,” Professor Ebony pointed to a crudely drawn shard of dust, before circling, “Dust Crystals are the condensed form of Dust powder. Dust Crystals cannot merge with the human body internally. However, they can be applied externally to heal wounds. A good example of this can be seen in Fire Dust Crystals, which can be cracked in half and used for cauterizing, or Ice Crystals, similarly handled to numb an area.

“Despite their beneficial purposes, there are still limitations and dire consequences to be considered, should the exposure to Dust happen in a less than ideal circumstance. If any of you ever get impaled by a Dust Crystal, you must immediately seek medical attention, even if your aura is still intact.” The professor lifted a jar of powdered Dust from her desk, holding it up for the class to see, “Powdered Dust is fatal inside the human body, especially that of a hunter’s. Its potency is not unlike the most toxic snake venom on Remnant. Please observe what happens when I take a few grains of this Fire Dust and dip it into this beaker of animal blood.”

Weiss and Ruby both straightened up, intrigued, as the teacher showcased a beaker labeled as “pig’s blood”. She swung it around slightly, swishing the liquid in it from side to side, staining the glass red. She then set the beaker back down for a moment, picking up a pipette and using it to syphon the Fire Dust.

Carefully, she dipped the tip of the pipette into the blood, releasing the Dust briefly by squeezing. The blood boiled for a few seconds, before going still.

The class grew silent as they watched the professor pull out a silver dish from behind her desk. She picked up the beaker full of blood and gently poured it onto the dish. Instead of the liquid falling from the glass beaker the way it should've, a coagulated lump plopped down instead, hitting the dish like a jelly.

“Whoa,” Ruby gasped, “That’s so cool!”

Weiss hummed, folding her arms over her chest. She had never actually seen it in person, what happened when Dust interacted with blood. She had studied it down to the minuscule chemical reactions, but her father had made sure she never actually witnessed the experiments take place. Something about it not being a suitable place for children.

“Professor? You only demonstrated powdered Dust and crystalline Dust. What about pure Dust?” A student called from behind her. The teacher bowed her head.

“Fantastic question. While it has been proven the most common types of Dust are fatal, the results of pure Dust on a human body have never been publicly released.” She explained.

“Why? Couldn’t scientists outside Atlas investigate it themselves?” Another voice. Weiss already knew that answer.

“Unfortunately, the only source of pure Dust comes from the Atlas Mountains. It is one of the rarest forms of Dust in existence, and it costs more than this entire school makes in a lifetime.”

“Can’t you get the Schnees to provide some?” Cardin’s voice boomed from the back of the classroom, “We have the daughter of the owner right here, after all.”

“I do have a *name*, Cardin,” Weiss growled, straightening her back, “And please tell me if I’m wrong, but I believe you’re also a part of a wealthy family. Couldn’t your family provide forged weapons for every student in the school?”

Ruby snorted at Weiss' response, sharing the same smug grin as her partner. The rest of the class began to chuckle lightly at Weiss' response. The Schnee could practically see the frustration growing on Cardin's disgruntled face behind her. She was right, and Cardin knew she was right.

"You got a problem with my family, Schnee?!" Cardin yelled, standing from his desk. The class grew tense as they waited for Weiss' response, all eyes turning to her and Ruby in the front row as the previous giggles died like a flame in water. Ruby gazed at Weiss, ready to stand up for her if she needed to.

She didn't need it, "No, but you forget the Winchester family works under the SDC. I know that your family is a struggling business, as do most people with some sense of knowledge. Most students in the current age build their own weapons from scratch rather than order them. Not to mention that the Atlesian Army uses Schnee branded arms instead of swords. There's simply no need for traditional smithy's anymore."

"Is that a threat?!"

"If you believe me speaking the honest truth is a threat, then I suppose so. I doubt your family business will see it to the next century."

There was a loud slam as Cardin pulled his chair back, the wood cracking against the backboard, "Say that to my face! I dare you, you mouthy bitch!"

Ruby physically prickled at that, her silver eyes filling with protective fury towards the bully. She turned to face him, a snarky remark climbing up her throat with venomous intent. Her mouth was already open when she felt a hand on her arm, turning to look at Weiss in shock.

"Weiss-?"

"Don't bother," Weiss hummed, turning her partner around to face the front again, "He's not worth it. And stubborn, to boot. You'll only end up in a fight."

"But he called you a-!"

“I’ve been called worse,” she voiced, sadly, causing a worried frown to flash across Ruby’s face, “I’ll be fine.”

Ruby relented, settling back into her seat with a defeated look. She didn’t like Cardin. He was always bullying people, getting under their skin and raging havoc. He always seemed to have a problem with Weiss, and it really got to Ruby.

Weiss would always allow Cardin to tear into her, mocking her family, her scar, anything he could get his grubby hands on. Ruby had heard him muttering something about her several times in the cafeteria, but whenever Ruby would try to stand up for her partner, Weiss would stop her. It was always the same.

“Winchester, I recommend you learn to control your tantrums quickly, else I’ll have to send you to Professor Ozpin. Now sit down,” Professor Ebony growled.

Cardin huffed, falling back into his seat with a grumble that Ruby couldn’t hear. The rose themed girl eyed her partner again, scanning her features to try and get a hint of what she was thinking.

“Now, as I was going to say before I was *rudely* interrupted, I want all of you to write an essay on the chemical formula of powdered Dust, and why it interacts so critically with human blood. Human blood composition is to be found on the 48th chapter of your textbooks.”

The final bell interrupted the teacher’s words, signaling the end of classes for the day. All of the students stood up quickly, rushing to get to the door before anyone else. Professor Ebony quickly shuffled out of the way as the rush of students threatened to flatten her, holding up a sheet of paper in desperation.

“There’ll be a quiz on this next week! Be sure to study!”

Weiss let out a heavy sigh, knowing she had a long night of writing ahead of her. She stood up from her seat and gathered her belongings. She stacked everything into a small pile before sensing a pair of eyes lingering on her. She blinked, turning, only to find Ruby staring at her. She narrowed her eyes.

“What?” Weiss asked, picking up her books and holding them in her arms. Ruby only narrowed her eyes more, before copying her.

“Why do you let him get away with it?” She asked, following after Weiss as she joined the group of students leaving the room. Weiss sighed.

“I already told you. I’ve been called worse, and I’d rather not waste my time arguing with someone who knows they’re wrong,” Weiss explained with a shrug.

“But doesn’t it upset you when he calls you that stuff?”

“Upset me? No, not anymore. It used to, but I’ve learned to just ignore him. You should too.” Weiss pushed her way into the hallway, Ruby following close behind. She could hear the surrounding kids already chattering about the event between the Schnee and the Winchester families in the hall.

“Are you sure?” Ruby asked once more. Weiss sighed, stopping her pace to stare Ruby dead in the eyes.

“Ruby. It’s okay, I’m fine,” she explained once more, irritation seeping in her voice before she calmed down again, “Now come on, let’s go meet the others for lunch.”

“Schnee!”

Weiss sighed as Cardin’s voice boomed down the halls, causing Weiss to turn away and break into pace towards the cafeteria. Ruby looked back to the bully, noticing the rest of his team had joined him, before jogging to catch up with Weiss.

“Hey! I’m talking to you!” A rough hand grabbed Weiss shoulder and spun her around, the grip painful. Weiss turned, eyes narrow and cold as she glared daggers up at Cardin.

“What do you want, then? I have places to be.”

“You have a lotta nerve-” He growled, raising his fist to hit her. Weiss watched it, hands lifting to defend her face from the punch that was aimed towards her. Ruby, on the other hand, stepped forward and shoved the man off her partner with a grunt before he could do anything.

Cardin staggered to the side, an annoyed scowl on his face, “Can’t even fight your own fights, can you? Why don’t you go call Daddy dearest and go to Atlas Academy instead? I heard it’s full of stuck-up little princess’ like you.”

“What is wrong with you?” Ruby growled, standing in front of Weiss protectively, “Why do you just- *hurt* everybody?!”

“Ruby,” Weiss muttered behind her, touching two fingers to the back of her shoulder to grab her attention. The redhead turned around to face her, her built up fury melting away in an instant. “Don’t waste your time. He’s only after the validation.”

“But- he-”

“*Ruby.*”

Ruby let out a frustrated growl, giving one more fierce glare at Cardin before turning and swiftly following Weiss towards the main doors. Cardin prickled, taking a step forward as if debating following them.

“You can’t run forever. Someday that little girlfriend of yours won’t be there to protect you.”

Ruby grit her teeth, pushing the doors open that led to the outside courtyard and disappearing from view of the gathered students.

Cardin snarled when he got no response, moving from the hallway to a nearby empty classroom, away from the growing mutters of the students around him. He swung the door open with a bang, letting the rest of team CRDL follow cautiously. His scroll in hand, he scrolled through pages of contacts with a single swipe of his finger.

Dove looked between Sky and Russel uncomfortably, folding his arms as he watched his leader cool from his temper tantrum, “Hey Cardin. Is all this worth it? I mean, she’s just a Schnee-”

“She’s not just a Schnee!” Cardin snapped back, shutting Dove up immediately, “She’s a mouthy bitch who insulted my family *and* my honor! She’s gotta pay.”

The three members of his team crossed unsure glances as Cardin finally found the right contact. He jammed his finger against the screen, bringing the scroll up to his ear as the contact “unknown” came onto his screen.

“Hey, I think I found a volunteer for your project.”

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“Cardin did *what*?!”

Yang’s voice made Weiss wince. She took another mouthful of soup, shaking her head as Ruby retold the story of the events that unfolded earlier. Glancing up from her bowl, she could feel the group’s eyes on her.

“It’s Cardin,” asserted Weiss, exchanging glances with the rest of her team and JNPR, who were staring back at her with various, different emotions on display, concern being the most prevalent of all facial expressions “I don’t know why any of you are surprised. He’s always had something against me.”

“That doesn’t give him the right to almost punch you,” Pyrrha said from across the table, catching the heiress’ attention.

“Damn right it doesn’t!” Yang growled, her lilac eyes turning crimson as her anger grew. Jaune rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly, well aware of what Cardin was like when he got mad.

“I say we break his legs!” Nora joined Yang on her feet, electricity sparking behind her cyan eyes. Yang smirked in agreement.

“Hell yeah!”

“Can you two calm down?” Blake said from behind Yang, “Team CRDL isn’t even here.”

“Nora, that’s enough.” Ren ordered, the sparking gingerhead defusing the second she heard his words. Ren shoved a bowl of grapes in front of her, which instantly caught her attention. She threw one into her mouth, before flinging one at Yang, who caught it in her mouth.

“The annoying part was that he followed us into the hallway and made a show,” Weiss grumbled, finishing her soup, “Honestly, he’s such a dense buffoon.”

“What did he say to you there?” Blake asked, golden eyes observing her with piqued interest.

“Nothing worthy of remembering.” Weiss grumbled.

“After I stepped in he just kinda backed away, and we left not too long after.” Ruby explained, biting down onto her third sandwich. Blake hummed, deep in thought, before burying her nose back into the book she was reading.

“If Professor Ebony saw it, I doubt team CRDL will be going on the monthly mission,” Pyrrha said.

“Good, that’s what they get for offending the best partner ever.” Ruby folded her arms in a fake huff, checking Weiss to try and see how she reacted.

She smiled as she saw a hint of a grin across the pale girl's face. She smiled herself, before taking up her final sandwich and taking a chomp out of it.

“Speaking of,” Pyrrha finished her own lunch, tidying her tray, “We also have another mission coming up.”

Ruby perked up from her snacking, mouth full, “Rwally? Sho shoon?”

A soft thump to the back of her head from Weiss almost made her choke. She swallowed her food quickly in surprise, “Don’t talk with your mouth full!”

Jaune chuckled nervously, “Y-yeah. Ozpin is sending us out tomorrow night.”

“Wow, go Vomit boy and NPR,” Yang stopped midway to catch a flying grape, chewing it quickly before swallowing it, “Where ya’ going?”

“We’re going to a village outside Haven to deal with some Grimm,” Ren explained, laying his chopsticks onto his empty bowl. Ruby’s eyes widened, her jaw dropping slightly.

“Mantle? Isn’t that a day away?”

“Yeah, we’re gonna be gone for a few weeks,” Nora said, aiming higher for Yang to catch the grape, “Hey! Do you think it’ll be beach season?”

“No Nora, the village is in the middle of a forest,” Ren sighed, already sensing the excitement bubbling from his partner’s aura.

“We were actually gonna go to Vale for the rest of the day,” Jaune mumbled, glancing briefly over at Weiss, who ignored his attempt, “We were wondering if you wanted to come along?”

“It’ll be fun!” Nora piped up, finally throwing the entire bundle of grapes into Yang’s face, who yelped in surprise. “Renny promised us ice-cream and I swore that I’d make him regret it.”

“Renny...?” Ren echoed quietly,

The blonde caught the bundle in her hand midair, a smile across her face, “Sure, I don’t see why not! Blake?”

Yang bumped the feline’s shoulder, however Blake’s eyes didn’t drift from the words on the page, “I don’t mind.”

“Weiss?” Jaune asked, hope lining his voice. Weiss looked up, catching the disappointment in Pyrrha’s eyes at the idea of Weiss being his invite rather than her. She groaned internally, rolling her eyes as she stood up. Jaune was so dense...

“I’ll have to pass.”

Yang looked down the table to their resident Ice Queen, hands pressing down on its surface, “Aw, come on Princess. Take some time off and hang out with us. I promise I won’t annoy you too much.”

Weiss huffed, folding her arms and cocking an eyebrow at Yang, “Now I’m definitely not going.”

“Why do you not wanna come? It’ll be no fun without you,” Nora moaned, bringing out her signature pouting face. Weiss let out a dull groan, uninterested.

“I’ve got an essay to work on, and a quiz to study for,” Weiss explained, “Besides, I can’t afford to go shopping this late into the month.”

“Aw man,” Nora pouted, deflating against the table.

“What about you, Ruby?” Pyrrha asked, noticing how the youngest watched Weiss in slight disappointment. Her head perked up immediately at the sound of her name, unsure how to respond.

“Uhh, I-I think I’ll stay too,” Ruby stammered, eyes lingering on Weiss for a minute, “T-to... To keep Weiss company!”

Weiss looked at Ruby, eyebrow cocked curiously. Ruby always wanted an excuse to get away from Beacon, and she had left Weiss alone plenty of times before. Why was this time so special? This was suspicious.

“I don’t need a babysitter Ruby,” Weiss remarked, hesitating at the edge of the bench as she tried to judge Ruby’s reaction. Ruby laughed awkwardly, and Weiss swore she saw a red blush dust her cheeks for a few seconds.

“I’m not babysitting you- I-I just... uh... I have to do the essay too.” Ruby quickly covered, struggling to force the growing, red heat back beneath her skin, “And I have no idea of what happened today in class, and- and I’m falling behind in dust chemistry.”

Weiss cocked an eyebrow, not buying Ruby’s stuttering excuses for a beat, “Uh-huh...”

“Aww,,” Yang cooed, watching the exchange between Ruby and Weiss with a smirk and her chin against her knuckles, “Look at the two love birds. Goin’ on a study date?”

“Yang!” Ruby snapped, the blush breaking free and going rampant this time, “It’s not a date!”

“Do what you want,” Weiss finally replied, leaving to bring her tray back to the front of the canteen, “But don’t whine at me when you regret it.”

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Weiss unlocked their dorm room with a click, Ruby’s lack of personal space making her uncomfortable. She pushed into the room, clicking on the light to reveal their home for the past year. Ruby sauntered in with a loud sigh, dumping her bag by the door and immediately hopping up onto her bed to relax.

“Ahh, I’m exhausted,” Ruby sighed into the pillow, sprayed across her tilted bed as her muscles ached, “So, whatcha wanna do?”

Weiss sighed, pushing Ruby’s hanging cape out of the way as she set out gathering her studying material from the locker, “Study.”

Ruby frowned, leaning over the side of the bed so that she hung directly beside Weiss, “Okayyyy, but what do you want to do *after*?”

“Ruby,” Weiss groaned, glancing to the side where her partner still hung upside down, “I told you before we got here: I’m going to study and then go to sleep.”

Ruby watched as Weiss moved back across the room towards the desk they shared, a pout on her face. She pushed herself from the bunk, flipping and landing on her foot and knee with practiced perfection.

“But, it’s early. Can’t studying, like, wait?” Ruby moaned, drifting over to the desk where Weiss had already settled. The Schnee sighed again, leaning back to look at her bored partner.

“You’re not a child, Ruby, you can entertain yourself. I need to study for this quiz and get a head start on this essay,” Weiss focused back to the task at hand, sheets and a pen already out in the open, “But you’re welcome to join me in writing it.”

“Eugh, not yet.” Ruby groaned instantly in response, reversing back onto her bed with a huff of air.

Weiss didn’t react to that, dedicating her full attention to homework instead. Ruby huffed in defeat, reaching into her pillowcase and pulling out her journal. She opened it carefully, pulling the pen from its spine and reading over the page she had been staring at for the last few weeks.

‘Operation ask Weiss on a date!!’

Ruby sighed, biting onto the end of her pen. The page was practically empty. All her other attempts were scribbled out to the point of not being readable anymore. She had tried so many times to get Weiss’ undivided attention, only for her plan to go sideways. The newest entry was the lone survivor of her criss-crossing, in plain view and as clear as day.

‘Study date?????’

Well, she had gotten to the point of being alone with Weiss, so that had to count for something, right?

She furrowed her brows, flipping back a few pages. Blake’s handwriting filled the page, tips and tricks written along the lines top to bottom. Ruby had read them over, studied them more than any test she had ever had in Beacon. Some parts were circled in red, some crossed out. She tapped at them with her finger, thinking back to the night that Blake had walked her through the words on the page.

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“Hey, Blake? Can I.. Um.. Talk to you about something for a minute?”

The faunus perked her head from her book, cat ears quirking forward. Ruby stood nervously at the side of her bed, fidgeting with her nail and staring at her feet. Blake cocked an eyebrow slightly, sitting up straight.

“Okay, what’s wrong?” She asked, shuffling to the edge of her own bed to gaze up at her team leader.

Ruby shuffled awkwardly on the spot, eyes cast to the ground. Weiss had gone to the library to study for a few hours in peace, while Yang had gone for a workout at the gym. It was just the two of them in the room and it would be for a little while more. She looked up and met Blake’s golden gaze, waiting patiently. Her feline ears were perked and ready.

“How...” she started, gathering her courage, “What does love feel like?”

“Love?” Blake echoed. She hummed, closing her book gently on her lap, “I suppose that depends on the context.”

Ruby looked lost already, “What do you mean by that?”

“Well, you love Yang and you love your Dad, right? That’s one type of love,” Blake held out one hand, “And then you have another kind of love, like, having a certain fondness and bond with someone. Like... Like a soulmate.”

“A soulmate?”

“Like a best friend but more. Soulmate’s are like best friends that feel like they were destined to meet, that ends up having something more between them.” Blake explained easily.

Ruby watched Blake for another minute, before looking back down to her fingers as a blush crawled up her neck, “O-okay, so, how do you know if your best friend- or, if you think you love- if you think-”

“It’s Weiss, isn’t it?”

Ruby's eyes widened in a heartbeat, blood rushing to her face at the suggestion, "Wha- ha- How did you know?!"

"Lucky guess," Blake giggled softly, folding her arms as she moved down the bed, patting the spot where she had been for Ruby to sit down. The younger girl took the spot graciously, looking at Blake with an expression between despair and helplessness.

"How does Weiss make you feel?" Blake asked, her voice soft and supportive as she pressed her palm to her chest. "Inside here."

Ruby hesitated, unsure of how to respond. She stared at her hands, trying to find the right words for what she felt. How did she make her feel? How could she explain it with what limited words she knew? The blush grew deeper on her face as she sat there trying to figure out how to go about it.

"Weiss... I don't know. She just makes me-"

"Happy?" Blake suggested. Ruby slowly nodded.

"Happier than happy" Ruby started to smile, slowly relaxing as her mind drifted, "She's pretty, and she's super nice under all of the ice- heh that rhymes," She paused, her own words finally catching up on her, "Even though she tries to act like a prickly pear, she's really considerate, and smart- and her laugh, gods." She let out a sigh, a weak chuckle following it, "I think I love her, Blake."

Blake brought an arm around Ruby's shoulder, "I think so too."

"How.. How do I deal with it? Do I make it go away? O-or do I tell her? What if she doesn't like me back?" Ruby stammered, eyes starting to water. Blake felt her heart clench, a wistful smile on her face as she watched Ruby's confusion only grow.

"You can't just get rid of it, Ruby. Love can't just be gotten rid of," explained Blake, gently rubbing the smaller girl's arm in support, "You should ask her on a date."

“Heh, yeah, right.” Ruby wiped the tears from her eyes, straightening up again, “Weiss would never go on a date with me. I’m just Ruby, the big idiot of the team.”

“You’re not an idiot, Ruby,” Blake said, letting her hands fall back to her lap, “You should give it a try. I bet you’d be surprised.”

Ruby sighed, playing with the side of her cape, “How do I even ask her on a date? This is Weiss we’re talking about. I probably can’t even imagine a number big enough to pay for a date for her.”

Blake smiled, “Well... who said you had to pay anything?”

*

Ruby went back to the start of the page, tapping her pen against the first point.

‘Get her alone and away from Yang.’

She smirked, drawing a quick check beside it. Part one, done.

Now for part two.

Ruby furrowed her brows, reading over the second line a couple times. This was the part that always got to her.

‘Ask her out by inviting her to Vale.’

Ruby’s smile fell. She didn’t have the courage to do that, no matter how many monsters she could face, or Cardins she could tell off, this wasn’t something in her repertoire of bravery. She would always freeze at the last moment and lose her resolve, along with her chance.

Moving back to her planning page, she stared. How do you ask the Weiss Schnee on a date without it sounding weird and creepy? She pondered for a moment, putting her pen to the page and writing.

'Miss Schnee, I have a proposition for you.'? Nah, too formal.

'Weiss I've had a crush on you for the past year, can we go on a date?' Nope, too forward.

'DATE ME WEISS.' Too aggressive.

'Some corny pickup line?' No, no. Weiss hated puns.

Ruby growled in frustration as she fell back, throwing her arms around wildly like a child having a tantrum. This was way harder than what Blake had said!

*

Weiss glanced over her shoulder to the mumbling and muttering girl on the bed, her eye twitching in annoyance. Couldn't Ruby just be quiet for a few hours? Just for *once*? The silver eyed girl never caught her glare, too insistent at staring down at her notebook and making disgruntled noises at it.

Weiss sighed, turning back to her essay. She couldn't focus, her mind drifting off at every opportunity. Ruby's murmurings weren't helping much, each groan or grumble bringing her back to how defensive she had acted in Professor Ebony's class a few hours ago.

Why had Ruby been so eager to risk getting bullied by Cardin? Ruby always seemed to do that for her. She was always willing to risk her life, or put hers in danger to protect her. At first, it used to annoy Weiss, and she'd snap back at Ruby saying how she could protect herself, and to stop, but Ruby never did.

Her mind drifted back to the fight against the Alpha King Taijitu the week prior, when Ruby had barreled into her and knocked her into the ground. Her face flushed at the thought, hands covering her face as she tried to hide the red shade growing on her pale cheeks. This wasn't right- she wasn't allowed to have feelings like this for Ruby, or even another girl.

What would her father think of her, if she did?

She could hear him now, *"You are a Schnee, and Schnees do not engage in ANY sort of scandalous, homosexual behaviour. You will not be a disgrace to this family and its name."*

She almost laughed at the impression in her head, sighing heavily. She had tried to date guys. Or really anyone who seemed fit for her *father* to approve. She had dated Neptune for a few months, but that hadn't been anything more than a fake friendship. They had nothing in common, and Weiss had held on until they practically didn't meet each other anymore. The relationship had died off on its own.

And then there was Ruby, and Weiss still wasn't sure how she felt about her. There was a spark that burned whenever Ruby was happy around her, or whenever she heard her quiet snorts while she slept, not to mention the way Ruby would bristle up when Weiss was offended, and how her silver pools would fill with a protective desire.

She shook the thought from her head, taking a breath and instead trying to focus on her essay. She would get this done, and then distract herself by studying for the rest of the night. That's how she always got rid of these useless emotions. Just shove her problems into a jar and store it deep inside her-

"Hey, Weiss?"

-Which would be impossible if said problem kept trying to talk to her.

"Yes?"

Weiss turned around to be met with Ruby standing beside her, practically sweating with nerves. Her mouth was open mid-sentence, forming into different shapes as she tried to force the words out.

"Uhm- hi, uh, give me a second- uh-" Ruby stammered, a blush slowly growing on her face. Weiss cocked an eyebrow, unsure what to expect from this show.

"Use your words Ruby," Weiss grumbled, unimpressed. Ruby gulped.

“R-right- words,” Ruby took a breath, looking to the ground as she fumbled with her fingers, “S-so.. I was wondering if- if you wanted to- like you don’t have to at all, this is only a suggestion and I wouldn’t be-”

“Ruby I can’t hear you when you mumble.” Weiss interrupted the flustered girl’s tangent, leaning back into her chair, “You’re beginning to waste my time.” Ruby flinched at that, straightening her back straight and closing her eyes tight.

“W-would you like to go to Vale with me tomorrow?!” She blurted out, the blush growing on her face. Well, she’d done it- now Blake couldn’t call her a scaredy cat anymore. “U-uh-you don’t have to though! I know you wanna study and stuff so if you can’t, it’s totally okay!- I just thought I’d ask y’know because we haven’t had a partner bonding day in forever and we have exams coming up and gods know when you’ll be free again and-”

“I can’t afford it, like I told Nora at lunch today,” Weiss said, slowly turning back to her work, “I’m low on funds, and I definitely cannot afford to buy out the entire offering of cookies at that bakery like last time.”

“What- what if you didn’t need any money?” Ruby pushed, leaning against Weiss’ table to try and grab her fleeting attention, “We could just go on a walk! O-or, y’know, window shop...?”

Weiss scoffed slightly, “This is starting to sound like a silly romantic date, Ruby.”

Ruby fell quiet immediately, biting down hard on her tongue. She stayed that way for a few seconds before it finally clicked in Weiss’ brain that Ruby was trying to ask her on a romantic date. Ruby had gone deep red, looking to her feet with a hurt gaze. Weiss felt her chest constrict in guilt as Ruby made a sad chuckling sound.

“Yeah, silly,” She took a deep breath, standing back up straight and putting on an all-too-happy look considering how she had sounded seconds before. “That’s okay! Some other time then?”

“Ruby...” Weiss mumbled as the girl pushed herself back off the desk. One date wouldn’t hurt her, would it? Even if it was just a walk, people had seen them around town before. Ruby’s ‘team bonding antics’ were relatively known around their group of friends, and any other strangers would possibly confuse them just for friends, right? *Just stop being a stuck-up ice queen for two minutes, Weiss, and go with your friend to do something fun for once.*

“Ruby, wait,” Weiss caught the red cape that lagged behind it’s owner, the softness of the cloth caught between her fingers. “I- I can r- I can pause my studying for tomorrow, but only for tomorrow. We can go to Vale for the day.” Weiss turned in her chair, meeting eyes with a silver pair that were staring back at her in awe. The moment suddenly got too awkward for Weiss, a scoff breaking whatever kind of glance that had been as she receded back beneath her emotional barriers, “But I’m only offering this once! And I’m *not* paying for anything, understand?”

A pair of arms wrapped around her neck as Ruby tackled her into a hug, “Yes! Thank you, Weiss!” Weiss let out a cough, fingers prying uselessly at Ruby’s hug grip. “You won’t regret it, I promise!” Ruby sprung off her, eyes wild like a child who’d been fed too much sugar. She grabbed her scroll from her pocket, eagerly tapping at the screen, “Oh, wait till I tell Blake! She’s gonna be so proud!”

“What?!”

CHAPTER 3 (5.6k) (R.)

The light in their dorm room slowly began to shift, moving from the cold white of the moon to a faint pink as twilight began to cast light through the curtains. Yang's loud snoring echoing off the walls as she slept, dead to the world. Her head was hanging off the edge of her mattress, her mane of blond hair even more tangled and messy than usual. Her legs were splayed up against the wall, the feeble blanket she had been covered in barely clinging to them.

Below that, Blake was curled into a tight ball, hands grasping her blanket tightly to her face. Her cat ears flickered in her sleep, moving ever so slightly to stretch out her limbs as she slept. She had pale lavender earplugs in both sets of her ears to block out Yang's noise, a gift from Ruby out of pity for the feline. Blake had laughed at the idea at first, but she'd buckled within the first week of having them.

Ruby sat on her own bed, knees tucked tightly to her chest as she finalized the details of the date that would be starting soon. Had she slept? No, but it wasn't her fault! Excitement raced through her veins like a drug, forcing her awake as she planned everything down to the smallest detail. Not that she was tired anyway.

She checked the time on her scroll, the sudden bright light blinding her for a second. She hissed quietly, lowering the blasted brightness of her scroll so that she could see the time and not go blind in the process.

4:52 A.M.

Ruby snapped her journal shut, flinching as it clapped loudly. She held in her breath as she looked over to Yang and Blake with an expression of horror. Yang snored on like nothing had even happened, and Blake only nuzzled her face further into her blankets with a quiet grunt.

Thanking the gods that she hadn't woken them, Ruby crawled off the side of her bed, landing as quietly as she could. She sighed, her eyes landing on Weiss's sleeping form beneath the sheets of her bed in passing.

Ruby halted, watching the delicate rise and fall on Weiss's shoulders as she rested, her shimmering white hair falling over the edge of the bed like a cascade of white silk. She was sound asleep, twisted underneath her sheets into a little ball. Her covers had slid down her shoulders, exposing her uncovered collarbone to the twilight.

Ruby took a breath, washing down the growing pit in her stomach. She didn't understand why she felt so nervous; she had woken Weiss up hundreds of times in the past, both accidentally and purposely, but now she found herself hesitating as she watched the heiress sleep. Something about the rise and fall of her chest comforted the smaller girl immensely. Seeing Weiss sleeping so soundly made her feel relaxed like everything would be okay. It made her want to crawl in beside her and stay there, squeezed tightly against the Schnee's cool skin.

Weiss shifted in her sleep, mumbling softly. The action snapped Ruby out of her trance, the silver eyed girl blinking several times as she came back from whatever planet she had landed on in her head. She didn't have any time to waste watching Weiss sleep, as calming and... admittedly creepy as it was.

She set her hand carefully on Weiss's shoulder, before shaking her lightly, "Weiss... wake..."

The girl beneath her groaned, shaking away from Ruby's touch with a slurred, "Ruby- go back to bed..." Weiss pulled her sheets closer to her face, nestling into the warmth of her duvet. Ruby frowned slightly, shaking her slightly harder this time.

"Weiss... Come on, we have to leave early or we'll miss it." Ruby whined, only to be ignored by the sleeping teen with a mumbled grunt. A sulk grew on Ruby's face as she tried to figure out a way to get the Schnee out of bed. The thought of ripping the sheets off came to the front of her mind, but she quickly dusted it away. Weiss would never forgive her if she did that.

"Uhhh," The girl's eyes drifted around the room as she tried to come up with something, before her eyes landed on the fridge humming alone under their wooden desk. She carefully snuck over to it, opening the freezer and quietly pulling out the ice tray. There were still a few ice cubes frozen in the silicone.

"Oh. *Oh*, these'll work...."

She quickly tip-toed back to Weiss' bed side, the ice in her hands already beginning to melt. She crouched down, her eyes landing on her nightdress's collar. Her silver eyes gleamed with mischief as she carefully pulled Weiss's hair out of the way.

“Final warning,” Ruby whispered, which caused an annoyed groan to escape from Weiss again. Ruby took that as her cue, pulling the heiress’s collar back and quickly pressing her hand full of ice to the warm skin that waited there.

Weiss immediately shot up with a surprised gasp, her blue eyes suddenly wide in shock. She reached over her shoulder with a hiss, clawing at her back to try and grasp the ice that had fallen through her dress. Ruby snorted quietly, a hand covering her mouth to help contain the choked noises that threatened to escape. Furious blue eyes found the snickering girl in the dark, burning angry holes into Ruby’s head.

“*RUBY ROSE!*” She hissed through gritted teeth, “*I am going to shove-*”

“Shh Shhh! Hurry and get dressed so we can gooo.” Ruby pressed her wet hand to Weiss’ mouth to stop her outburst, hopping to her feet quickly. Weiss’s eyes flared at her in rage, her furious choice of words muffled beneath Ruby’s palm despite how hard she tried to pry the reaper’s hand away. They stayed there like that for a long minute, Weiss’ angered flare flickering to death the longer they sat. After a minute, Ruby slowly moved her hand away, watching Weiss like she was going to launch at her throat if she moved too fast. Weiss was already distracted from that though.

Ruby wasn’t wearing her signature combat clothes, instead she’d put on nice clothes that Weiss didn’t even know she owned. She wore a cuffed, long sleeved, cotton shirt with a half dress/corset style piece that came up to just below her bust. Beneath that she had a red skirt underlayer, complemented by black tights and black boots. Her old red cape was pulled around her shoulders, something, it seemed, Ruby couldn’t go without.

“I-” Weiss stammered before clearing her throat, looking at her scroll that sat charging by the bed in an attempt to draw her dumbstruck gaze away from her partner, “Ruby, it’s still dark outside. Why did you even wake me up? Why are you all dressed up like that?”

“*Because* we need to start our date, duh!” Ruby whispered like it was obvious, moving behind Weiss to push her towards the dresser, “And we need to get to the docks, so go go go!”

Weiss squeaked in surprise as Ruby followed through, looking over her shoulder as a blush crept up her neck, “Our date?-- Couldn’t you have waited until morning like a *sane* person?”

“Nope!”

Weiss sighed in defeat, finally pushing Ruby off her and standing for herself. She should’ve expected something like this. Now she only wished she had gone to bed earlier... “Alright, fine. Give me a moment to get changed.”

“*Finally.*”

-

Weiss was slowly starting to regret accepting Ruby’s offer to go on a date.

She was expecting something a lot... cheesier from the younger girl, especially considering how shy she had been asking the Schnee the *night before*. She was fully expecting a stereotypical, cliché date: go for dinner, maybe see a movie- but waking up before sunrise and walking to the docks? That had never crossed her mind. Maybe she should’ve expected the unexpected? Probably. Either way it was too late now.

A chill blew through the courtyard, wrapping around Weiss before falling away with a brisk shiver. She'd decided to wear something a little less fancy than she usually would, clad in a thick, white buttoned coat Winter had gifted her, and a small, black dress beneath that just poked out underneath the white. She'd also gone for black tights along with her thigh high boots for extra warmth. Not that she needed them per say. The outfit had been complete without them, but it never hurt to be generous when it came to low temperatures.

"We're almost there." Ruby announced, mist parting her lips as she spoke. It was particularly cold this morning, enough so for a thin layer of ice to form on the cobblestone in the courtyard. Weiss was being cautious with her steps so as to not slip on the frozen surface. There was nobody else in sight, a few drowsy birds starting up their morning songs in the trees around the yard. Lights shone from the dormhouse windows as early class students began to wake. Weiss was glad they'd been slated off for her this year.

"Are you going to tell me why we're taking a boat and not an airship?" Weiss asked, "Or is that a secret too?"

"You'll see." Ruby mused. Weiss rolled her eyes, a small smile growing on her face. So far, she hadn't managed to get any information out of Ruby as to what they were going to be doing. She couldn't help the air of unease that led her questioning. Surprises usually turned sour for her, but she had some faith in her partner.

"Right."

Weiss had to admit though, the sky was pretty during this particular time of the day. Pale purples and reds washed through the clouds, a sign of the sun's closed arrival. It truly was a sight to behold, especially as it reflected off the water on the horizon. This was reason enough to be up so early.

"Ah, we didn't miss it! Thank the gods," Ruby relieved suddenly, drawing Weiss's attention forward and away from the sky.

At the end of the pier sat an old looking boat. It was mainly white, with small red accents and a big crimson turnwheel at the back. Fairy lights hung from each of the arches that spread across the sides, while a chimney pumped gray plumes of smoke from the top. Weiss's eyes widened, her pace slowing to a halt as she took in the rare sight.

"Weiss Schnee, meet the S.S Osiria." Ruby mocked a posh English voice, turning to judge Weiss's reaction. Ruby couldn't tell if it was good or bad. "We'll be riding her to Vale!"

Weiss couldn't take her eyes off the boat as they drew closer, "...how?" She had never imagined that she'd call a boat 'nice', but there was something about the one in front of her. The archways, the small hanging lights wrapped carefully around the pillars along the sides. It was definitely a rare sight, usually these docks were filled with ugly transporters and cargo ships hauling Dust or food to the school.

"The Captain brings students to Vale every morning, free of charge." Ruby explained as she finally reached the edge of the pier, close enough to jump, "I found it one morning on a jog. Captain's name is Pete, he's a cool guy."

Weiss furrowed her brows in confusion at that last part, "Since when do you jog this early in the mornings?"

"I don't. I used to- as a new year's resolution." Ruby itched the back of her head with a sheepish grin, "I couldn't handle the early mornings very well..."

"Ah."

The boat let off a shrill whistle, a warning that it was time to go. Weiss turned to look at the temporary bridge the boat was docked to, and then to Ruby expectantly. "Shouldn't we get on?"

“We are!” Ruby replied far too cherily, backing up along the way they’d just came while keeping her eyes locked to the edge of the ship. Weiss looked on, puzzled, as her partner came to a halt. Then she looked back to the sizable gap from the pier to the boat, before realizing exactly what her ‘date’ was about to do with a groan.

“You won’t make that,” Weiss commented, stepping closer to the edge. It was a decent six foot jump, at least, but the edges of the cobble were slimy with moss, and the boat’s deck was soaked. Ruby flashed her a grin, stretching out her calf and massaging the muscles there with her fingers.

“Sure I will! I just have to get a good running start.”

Weiss sighed, “I am not saving you from the water, Ruby.”

“You won’t need to. I can even do it without my semblance!”

“*Really?*” Weiss huffed, taking a few steps back from the edge to give Ruby more room, “If you’re so confident, *without* your semblance, please be my guest.”

Weiss smirked, and Ruby smirked back. Ruby had made dozens of jumps like this before, and she was fast, even without the assisted speed of her semblance. She dug her heel into the cobble, and ran. She quickly gained on the edge, counting her steps until she had to jump. 5..4..3..2..

Jump!

Ruby flew through the air, landing just barely on the edge of the ship. Her arms flailed wildly in the air as she tried to keep her balance, teetering backwards slightly in a moment of panic before finally catching herself and falling forward onto the slippery deck. She let out a sigh of relief, wiping the sweat from her forehead before turning and facing Weiss.

“Okay-” She said, placing her hands on her hips as she backed away from the edge of the boat, “Your turn!”

Weiss stared at her flatly for a moment, before turning, “Uh, no. I’m getting on the normal way.”

Ruby pouted as Weiss walked along the dock to where the bridge was. Weiss sighed, shaking her head as she crossed the board onto the boat. Trust Ruby to go the hard way. She was always a daredevil of sorts. Always trying to impress Weiss. Even if she wouldn’t admit it, she *was* surprised Ruby had made the jump, and equally as impressed considering she didn’t use her semblance, even if she had been secretly hoping that she’d get to watch Ruby fail miserably.

One of many surprises today, it seemed.

Once she got on, she found Ruby sitting cross legged at the very front of the boat, patting her side as a sign to sit down. The heiress rolled her eyes slightly, moving and sitting with her knees tucked beneath her.

“Maybe next time you should just take the normal option instead of needlessly risking your life.” Weiss mused as she sat down, the boat beginning to drift away from the pier. Ruby laughed, leaning back on her hands at her partner’s words.

“Is that your way of saying you don’t want me to get hurt?” Ruby asked, earning a playful huff from her partner.

“No, I just don’t want a soggy first date, that’s all,” Weiss replied, eyes gazing out across the river.

“So you *do* want me to get hurt? Oh, what will it take to thaw thou frozen heart?” Ruby fake whined, earning a playful shove from the girl beside her.

“Oh, shut up,” she chuckled warmly, glancing back at the brunette as they got further from the school, “You still haven’t told me why we took a boat to Vale. An airship would have been much faster.”

Ruby checked her scroll, her smile lingering softly on her cheeks, “You’ll see at any moment now.”

Weiss frowned, following Ruby’s silver gaze across the river and towards the skyline. Almost as if on cue, a bundle of warm orange began to rise from behind the horizon. It blinded Weiss for a moment, causing her to squint as her eyes adjusted at the sudden brightness. She blinked a few times, before opening her eyes again to stare across the river surface. She gasped.

A ball of orange light began to crawl from beneath the horizon, painting the clouds in stark red and orange and chasing away the lilac’s and pink’s from the twilight. Clouds that floated in front were being dyed a palette of warm and cool tones, while the perfectly undisturbed river surface mirrored the sky’s extravagant hues. The water rippled quietly against the hull of the S.S Osiria, mixing with the low rumbling of the boat as they traversed the split between the school and the mainland.

After a while, Ruby anxiously shifted her gentle gaze back to her partner, who was still mesmerized by the storybook scene before her, a glow in her azure eyes. Her silver hair flowed behind her in the wind, revealing her face in the rising sun.

It was in small moments like these, when Weiss let her walls down, that Ruby could truly see her partner for who she was. Beneath her façade of royalty and selfishness sat a girl who was only beginning to experience life for the first time. Like a baby bird learning to fly away from its crumbling nest. Ruby loved that version of Weiss, and she worked hard to earn such a treat.

Weiss’s once steeled walls were slowly beginning to chip away, and with each chunk that fell, Ruby discovered something new. Like Weiss’s full laugh, something that the entire team had only heard for the first time merely weeks ago. Ruby had been stunned silent, and immediately started thinking that they had ‘broken’ the heiress.

Feeling content and fulfilled, Ruby smiled, her hand shifting closer to brush her pinkie against Weiss’s smaller one. She could feel Weiss flinch slightly at her touch, however she didn’t pull her hand back.

“Do you like it?” Ruby asked hopefully. Weiss nodded her head, a sigh turning into quirked lips as she turned to face Ruby, whose face was glowing in the sunrise.

“It’s breathtaking.” Weiss concluded, her azure eyes moving back to the sky. Ruby did the same, her eyes shining as she took in the sight. She had seen sunrises like this many times as a child with Yang atop their roof in Patch, but this morning was special. Having Weiss beside her made it special, a memory that she would cherish for the rest of her life. Just like every memory she had of Weiss. It was magical, how easily they completed each other. Red and white, the calculated and the wild. Ruby often lay awake at night thinking about it. Weiss’ sharp spines always broke away whenever Ruby was around, and in turn, Ruby’s always seemed to work better with Weiss.

Meant to be.

“Kinda like you...” Ruby muttered low under her breath, heat wrapping up her neck and spreading across her cheeks as her words lingered in her mouth.

“What was that?” Weiss hummed, soft eyes finding Ruby’s furiously blushing face.

“Um.. nothing.”

Weiss’s gaze drifted to the water again, blushing at the earnest compliment. She hummed shyly, catching a piece of loose hair and tucking it behind her ear. Ruby took another nervous breath, using her free hand to scratch behind her head.

“Are you.. Uh.. enjoying yourself, so far?”

Weiss shifted her stance, pulling her knees from beneath her and tucking them to her chest to help keep it warm. As beautiful as the view was, the winds still carried a cold bite to them. Ruby’s question floated around in her head for a moment, words changing on her tongue as she tried to find the right ones. Ruby definitely had her attention now, but Weiss was always told to play hard to get. She wasn’t going to just drop her walls right away because she was dating someone she already considered a close friend.

In the end, dates were a way to impress your loved one, to win them over, or at least that was how Weiss always saw it. As a Schnee, she had some form of reputation to uphold, especially considering she was with Ruby in public, and that Ruby was a girl. She had forewarned Ruby the night before to be cautious with her romantic actions, because if Weiss’s father caught wind of her endeavors, there would be almighty fury waiting for her on the other end of her scroll.

After a few seconds of debating, Weiss finally nodded, turning to meet Ruby’s anxious eyes, “I suppose I am.” She saw the apprehension immediately melt in those pools of silver as she spoke, Ruby’s nervousness suddenly faded. Weiss raised an eyebrow teasingly, “But you’re going to have to do a lot more than just showing me a pretty sunrise to win me over.”

Ruby laughed softly, shuffling closer to Weiss as the Vale City docks began to come into sight, “I know. This is a date you won’t forget, I promise.”

Weiss hummed again, shifting closer to Ruby’s comforting warmth, “I’ll hold you to that.”

The pair remained mostly silent for the remainder of the ride, pressed closely together as the sun rose above the horizon to settle in the sky. The small boat arrived in the docks quickly, where similar sized ships brought fruits and other small goods for sale in markets that morning. By the time they had gotten close enough to lay the boardwalk down, a small fish market was already bustling with people and faunus alike, hoping to get the fresh catch from that morning.

Weiss scrunched up her nose as she followed Ruby through the wooden piers, looking around at the woven baskets of fish that were quickly emptying, “Gods, the smell-”

Ruby turned to look at her partner in surprise, “Never been to a fish market before?”

Weiss shook her head in response, “Not once. Usually all our food and supplies were delivered to the estate and kept in the basement.”

“Wait, have you never been to a market?” Ruby asked again, slightly dumbfounded. Again, Weiss shook her head.

“No.”

“Well then,” the glint in Ruby’s eyes was hard to miss, and Weiss didn’t know if she had to be worried or not, “You are going to love where we are heading.”

Weiss frowned in slight fear, “Don’t tell me your date plan was to bring me to a fish market.” Weiss didn’t know how much longer she could put up with this smell. She never enjoyed fish, only ever eating it because she wouldn’t get anything else if she didn’t. The forced diet had only made her dislike seafood even more. The mere thought of spending the entire morning here made her stomach churn. “If that’s the case, then I’ll just go home now.”

“Well, not exactly,” Ruby explained nervously, “It’s not a *fish* market...”

“Then what kind of market is it?” Weiss asked, skipping her step to catch up to Ruby so she could walk beside her. Ruby looked nervous, her eyes avoiding Weiss’s. That was never a good sign...

...

A *black* market.

Ruby had brought Weiss to a black market, *on a date*.

“Please tell me you’re not serious,” Weiss groaned, pinching the bridge of her nose in building frustration. They were standing in the middle of an airship yard, skeletons of old, retired ships having been dumped here. There were cars here as well, beneath it all, rusted and dented beyond recognition from before whatever company had bought the site.

Several cars had been pushed together to form a valley of sorts, a massive, blue tarp draped across the destroyed vehicles to act as a roof for the vendors beneath. Several stripped lights were strung high on poles, lighting the dim area with the help of an old functioning engine. Several hooded figures traveled in and out of the markets, faunus tails and horns peeking from their garments.

‘It looks like a horror movie setting.’ Weiss thought to herself, gulping nervously.

“Weiss, welcome to your first Market!” Ruby spun around to face her partner, only to flinch at the glare Weiss was giving her. Weiss looked up as a young faunus appeared from under the tarp, looking up to spot the Schnee who was watching, before scowling and walking away.

“A-a-and you don’t like it...”

“No.”

“O-oh...” Ruby turned to try and regain Weiss’s rapidly draining eagerness, snatching both of Weiss’s hands in her own out of nowhere. The Schnee looked up to meet Ruby’s begging eyes, “It’s not as bad as you think. Plus, it’s only to get breakfast. There’s a really good baker who comes here-”

“Ruby, you just brought a *Schnee* to a black market full of *faunus*,” Weiss argued, “Don’t tell me you’re actually this dense?”

“It’s not a black market. It’s just... quirky...”

“It’s a market, outside of Vale, in a *junkyard*,” Weiss growled, “Of course it’s a black market.”

Ruby’s eyes grew downcast, her earlier eagerness dissipated. Weiss’s heart suddenly twisted in guilt, her eyes widening upon seeing how upset Ruby had gotten, “If you’re not comfortable, we can leave.” Her eyes brightened

ever so slightly again at her own idea, but the heiress could still see the flicker of shame in her silver eyes, “I’ve got a lot more planned anyway! Come on, let’s go.”

Weiss’s stern determination not to go inside faltered, second thoughts beginning to worm their way into her resolve. She frowned, looking up to catch a faunus looking at her, before skittering off upon being noticed. Her frown deepened, unsure.

“*Wait*,” Weiss mumbled, catching Ruby’s arm as she brushed past her, “Maybe.”

Ruby twisted back to face her date, “Maybe?”

“I don’t want you to be sulking for the rest of the morning…”

Ruby frowned slightly, cocking her head, “But you’re not comfortable right? We don’t have to-”

“I certainly won’t be comfortable,” Weiss snorted, “You’re asking for something bad to happen.”

Ruby tilted her head, confused, “S-so you want to go in, or…?”

A sigh, “As a Schnee, no, but potentially as someone else.”

Ruby fell silent, horribly confused. Weiss was staring at her like she did when Ruby did something stupid. She didn’t want to go as a Schnee? But, she couldn’t just not have a surname. That was a part of her identity- *Ohhhhh*.

“Oh, I get it! Like a disguise!” Ruby concluded, rousing an eye roll from her partner beside her.

“Yes, but the only thing is I don’t have the faintest idea of what I could use.” Weiss hummed, looking around to the abandoned cars with a grimace, “and I’d very much prefer not to wear anything that’s been sitting here for centuries.”

Suddenly, Ruby reached up and unclipped her cape from her shoulders. Weiss watched in surprise as Ruby lifted the cape off of herself and folded it around her, folding it over Weiss’ neck before reaching back and pulling the hood up.

“There! Now nobody will recognise you!” she proclaimed proudly, planting her hands on her hips.

“But- This is your cloak!” Weiss stammered, readjusting her shoulders as she got familiar with the warm weight of the cloak. Ruby shrugged.

“I’ll be fine without it for an hour or two.” she hummed happily. Weiss would have sunk into the warmth of the cloak there and then, the pure smell of roses wafting off the cape in waves, soothing any remaining fears, and making her drowsy. It held Ruby’s warmth, chasing away the chill that constantly haunting Weiss’s bones.

It was odd seeing Ruby without her cloak, Weiss noticed. Her shoulders were much… broader than Weiss had thought they were, years of practice with Crescent Rose having bulked her out. Ruby wearing such a skin-tight shirt didn’t help either, the fabric sticking to the rigid curves along her arms. Typically Ruby’s loose dress hid the majority of her… highlights… Weiss felt heat prickle up her neck as a blush made itself known.

“I- okay, I’ll wear it.” Weiss sighed, pulling the red cloak together, hiding her completely from prying eyes. She sucked in a breath for the one she had let out, straightening her stance, a regal air gathering around her, “*But* we leave this place the instant I say so.”

Ruby lifted her hand in a salute, those muscles Weiss had been admiring earlier flexing beneath the knitted fabric, “Yes ma’am! Let’s get going before all the good stuff is gone.”

Weiss cautiously followed Ruby’s fearless advance beneath the tarp, anxiously pulling at the hood as they entered the main area. String lights lit each ‘stall’, if they could be called that. Hundreds of people were inside, carrying bags full of items they’d bought (*illegally*, considering where they were), while others crowded the merchants. Weiss kept close to Ruby, practically clinging to her back as they made their way deeper into the market.

She looked around, taking note of the types of people that were there. Most of them were like her, caped and trying to remain anonymous in such an area, while others wore nothing to hide their identities. A mother with children trudged their way through the crowds, horns sticking from their heads, while the baby held to her chest with rags cried loudly. Weiss watched as a young cat boy, maybe 13, picked an apple off a merchant’s table, causing an unholy uproar from the faunus merchant.

Weiss frowned suspiciously, looking around a bit more. It seemed everyone she looked at held some type of faunus trait; ears, tails and wings attached to most people that she looked to. Guilt pooled in her stomach as she leaned closer to Ruby, keeping her voice low.

“Why are they all faunus?” She whispered.

“They’re mostly poor Faunus from other continents,” Ruby explained quickly, “A lot of them are ex-miners. They sell their old gear to try and make a profit. There are some humans here as well.”

“I... I see.” Weiss mumbled sadly, her ocean eyes growing cloudy as she began to regret her own maiden name. If they were miners, the chances that they worked for her Father’s company were too high to count as a chance. Many of the sellers that had mining equipment on the table were older, and the rare few that were young were covered in scars and missing limbs. One of the merchants caught her staring, sending her an annoyed glare and a growl as he bit down on a twig. Weiss immediately snapped her gaze back to Ruby, gulping nervously.

“Ah, there they are,” Ruby said suddenly, gaining Weiss’s attention. Ruby turned to lead Weiss over to a sweet smelling stall, covered with baked goods and baskets filled with bread. A young fox faunus sat there, eyes brightening as she saw Ruby come closer. Her small ears perked up, disturbing a sleeping boy that had been resting on her shoulder. A sibling, Weiss guessed.

“Ruby!” the girl spoke, her voice dripping with an Atlesian accent. Weiss’s eyes widened in shock. She didn’t look Atlesian; her skin was sallow and freckled. Most people in Atlas had pale skin.

“Hi Amber,” Ruby chirped, a smile growing on her face, “It’s good to see you here!”

“I wouldn’t say it’s good to be here,” she laughed, coaxing a giggle from Ruby too. A pang of jealousy hit Weiss like a lightning strike, fire shooting through her. She stepped forward and her plan of hanging back went out the window. The way those grassy eyes were staring at Ruby made her skin bristle, her eyes flickering like an icy fire.

Amber’s eyes flicked up to meet Weiss’s, a laid back grin forming on her lips as she leaned against her palm, “And who’s this mighty fine lass? And wearing your cape, no less?”

Ruby looked to find Weiss standing beside her, a nervous blush growing across her cheekbones, “Oh, uh, Amber this is W-”

Weiss's heart plummeted to her stomach. These people couldn't know who she was. If they did, gods know what could happen to them. This place was filled to the brim with dangerous weapons and dust. They could be killed in seconds, aura or not. She decided on the first thing that came to mind-

"*Her girlfriend*," Weiss blurted suddenly, a deep shade of red having settled in her cheeks as her own words escaped her lips. Ruby froze, her eyes wide in shock as the blush from before grew rampant along her skin. Weiss could feel her silver eyes glaring at her in disbelief, but she held her annoyed stare towards the fox, her face practically glowing with the heat coming from it.

Amber cocked an eyebrow, a single canine peeking from beneath her grinning lips.

"Do I sense jealousy, Miss '*her girlfriend*'?" she teased, a playful glow in her eyes. Weiss practically felt her veins bulge out of her head, her limbs growing stiff as she devised a sentence that encompassed all her growing embarrassment and rage. Ruby could feel her anger boiling off in her aura, broken sounds coming from her as she picked her jaw up from the floor.

"She.. I-.. Y-yes," Ruby finally choked out, "This is my g-girlfriend."

Amber snorted slightly, leaning back from the bench with a breath, "Whatever you say Ruby. I ain't one to shame someone, especially such a frequent customer."

"Frequent cust-..." Weiss echoed, turning and pinning Ruby with a bitter glare. How did she not notice Ruby's apparent *frequent* visits to such dangerous places?! If she had known, she would've stopped it long ago, whether her partner liked it or not.

She doubted Yang knew about this- well, then again it was likely Yang had introduced her to black markets in the first place, knowing her. How had Ruby even gotten here in the past without Weiss noticing? Weiss always kept tabs on her teammates... "How long have you been coming here?!"

Ruby looked at her sheepishly, like a child caught with her hand in the cookie jar, "Uh- a few months..?"

"*What?!*"

"Not to butt in on your lovers quarrel or anything," Amber interrupted, cutting Weiss's prepped tangent before she even got to start, "but here's your usual, plus a bagel for '*the girlfriend*'." She winked at the heiress, rousing a gentle pink across her cheeks. Weiss grit her teeth together, nails digging into her palms beneath the cape. She certainly had the *attitude* of an Atlesian.

Ruby reached for the plastic bag, looking inside of it before smiling in satisfaction. She reached into her pockets, pulling out a few coins and handing them to the cunning fox that Weiss was beginning to really hate, "Thanks Amber. Be seeing you?"

The fox huffed, folding her arms over her chest as a glint formed in her eyes, "If you survive being her girlfriend, maybe. Just gotta catch me first."

Ruby half-laughed, rubbing the back of her head, Weiss eagerly backing away from the stall as they said their goodbyes. Suddenly, prickles rose up her neck and curled her stomach. Something felt... off, just enough to where she

couldn't set her finger on it. She scanned the crowd of thinning faunus, but she found nothing. An unsettling feeling sprouted from her chest, a worried crease forming on her features.

She scanned the crowds again. For an instant, she could've sworn she spotted someone in a white mask watching her from behind a weapons booth, a cloak draped around them. Weiss frowned, taking a step back to try and see who it was. When she did, the figure disappeared into the moving people, lost in the shapes of black. Weiss frowned, gently tugging Ruby's elbow as dread set in.

"Weiss?" Ruby's voice pitched in worriedly, having noticed her partner's confused glares. Weiss pulled back, eyes still locked in the same place, tucking the red cape around herself tighter. She looked freaked out, or like she had seen a ghost, "Did you see something?"

"Where did he..." She murmured quietly, completely ignoring Ruby's question, still watching the spot where her stalker had been. She could feel the worry and concern radiating off her partner in waves.

"What did you see?" Ruby asked again, a whisper of protectiveness in her voice. Weiss shook her head, waving her off as she recomposed herself with a steady breath.

"Nothing. It must have been my imagination," she shrugged. It must've been. The man- whatever it was, was wearing a mask. They probably weren't even looking at *her* specifically, just her nerves getting the best of her. She was just paranoid, "It's fine."

"Are you sure?" Ruby pressed. Weiss sighed heavily, placing a hand on her hip as she stood.

"Yes Ruby, I'm positive. Now, can we go?" She asked, "Your cloak is *extremely* warm." A lie, but she hoped it would steer Ruby off what had just happened.

"Oh, yeah, it can get really warm *suuuper* quickly," Ruby tied her bag into a knot and stuffed it into her pocket, "Let's get going then. We've got the whole day to burn."

"Great," Weiss huffed, a smile returning to her face as Ruby began to walk through the crowds, "Finally some progress. Remind me to plan the date next time."

"Hey! I'm trying- I was hungry!"

The bickering pair quickly made their way into the crowds, disappearing from sight.

..

A masked figure watched as the huntress duo disappeared, having gone unnoticed atop the stack of cars. He jumped down, landing beside Amber, who looked up to him unimpressed.

"Pay up," she snarled, holding out her hand, "Or who knows what I'll do with your information."

"Was the Schnee with her?" He demanded, dropping a black sack of coins into her outstretched hand. The fox opened the string around it, her eyes sparkling when she saw the amount of money on the inside. The young boy beside her nodded, picking up his mask from beneath the stall.

"White hair, scar over her left eye, attitude. It was her alright," He hummed, pulling his black cloak around his shoulders. The other hooded figure looked back to the fox, who was happily putting the Lien into her pockets.

"Did they mention anything else?" He asked. The fox shrugged, leaning back into a stack of hay behind her.

“The Schnee is a lesbian. That girl with her was ‘her girlfriend’ apparently,” she explained, before frowning slightly, “Anything else is gonna cost ya.”

The smaller boy looked to the stalker, before shrugging and phasing into the crowds. The taller figure followed, reaching up to press a hand to his earpiece.

“Target is leaving the market. Can confirm that Rose is with her,” he lowly growled, “They seem to be romantically involved.”

An excited snort came from the other end of the line, “*Well now, I wasn’t expecting to hear that!*”

The male frowned, “What are your orders?”

“*Follow them,*” the voice answered, “*I want to personally pay a visit to Snow White and Little Red...*”

CHAPTER 4 (5.1k) (R.)

Weiss took a gentle breath as the cool spring air cleared her head from the stuffiness of the black market. The tightly packed mass of faunus and occasional humans gives her a suffocating taste of claustrophobia. She preferred to be in a colder environment, true to her experience of growing up in Atlas. Living in a chilled, marble-clad home with the addition of Atlas’ eternal winter tended to do that to people. Apparently, it also ran in her blood-line... something akin to having a fairly good tolerance of harsh, sub-zero weather. According to the family practitioner, Weiss had inherited it. It predominantly favored the female half of the family.

Altogether, the Black Market had been rather... unpleasant.

In the end, she blamed the sensation of being watched on her paranoia. Not to mention, they were in a market full of people, in the presence of many, *many* prying eyes. The chances there were people staring at her were unfathomably high, but there was no proof that whoever was watching her was hostile. The strange sensation had disappeared as soon as they’d left anyway, and thus far they had remained unbothered.

Weiss now busied herself with dusting red fluff off her white coat, picking the many clumps of fuzz between two fingers and letting them blow away in the wind. They were remnants of Ruby’s cloak, which she returned once they had moved away from the market completely. Ruby had assisted her in the tedious removal of the red leftovers on Weiss’ back upon noticing them, the tufts standing out like droplets of blood on bloodless snow. Weiss’ annoyance

hadn't gone unnoticed, but she'd gotten over it pretty quickly. It was an old, red cloak on a *white* coat. There was bound to be some sort of residue afterwards.

However, the flowery smell of roses had stubbornly clung to her jacket, although she didn't particularly mind that. It brought back long-lost memories of her playing in the rose garden with Winter at the estate at home. She remembered running around and through her mother's bushes of red and white flowers in an ornate game of hide and seek. They had been her Mother's pride and joy, carefully tended to by the gardeners, and Weiss had ended up trampling some of them in her innocence. She had gotten a stern scolding to that day, as well as a few dozen band-aids on her arms and legs.

Ruby let out a dramatic sigh beside her, dropping her scroll to her side with a gentle laugh, "I'm the worst at this whole romance thing, aren't I?"

Weiss was slightly taken aback by the sudden statement. Ruby wasn't the best, no, not by a long shot, but she definitely wasn't the worst. Jaune still held that title, and embarrassingly so. Weiss had to stop keeping count of the amount of times Jaune had appeared out of nowhere playing his guitar. He was good at the instrument, Weiss would give him that much, but his songwriting skills still needed improvement. Then, there was that one time he'd sent her a poorly written love poem, which she'd promptly returned covered in grammar corrections and rewording.

"I wouldn't say that you're the *worst*, there's still Jaune..." Weiss said, trying to ignore the glare originating from her partner, "But perhaps you *do* have some more to learn."

"Jaune is hopeless. I feel bad for Pyrrha," Ruby mumbled.

"I don't particularly agree with her choice of... men either, but I would appreciate it if she acted soon so that Jaune would leave me alone."

Ruby's defeated sigh made Weiss' heart crack, a sad sulk forming on Ruby's face. The brunette rubbed the back of her neck nervously, peeking a glance over to Weiss, "Maybe you should plan the dates from now on."

Weiss scoffed, "That's assuming I'll go on another one with you."

Ruby's eyes widened in hurt, clearly not expecting those words. Her shoulders slouched forward, a fake smile on her face, "It was that bad, huh?"

No, no she didn't mean it that way. Weiss' heart missed a beat, and she immediately jumped to cover her poor choice of words, "It was a *joke*, Ruby. Of course I'll go on another date with you."

Ruby nodded quietly, sending another shot of guilt through Weiss. Weiss' brows knit together in disappointment, having ruined whatever moment had been forming between them. Weiss swallowed her stubborn pride and took a hesitant step closer to Ruby. She could practically feel her partner's aura rubbing against her own, pulsing gently in idle.

Ruby looked over to her partner in astoundment, but Weiss was trying to ignore the sudden closeness between them. She wasn't a very affectionate person. She usually didn't like being physically close to people, but this was an exception, or at least that's what she told herself.

"So... I may or may not have based it off one of the books Mom would read to me when I was younger," Ruby admitted with a blush, coaxing a gentle laugh from Weiss.

“Why am I not surprised?” Weiss purred, catching the relieved smile that appeared on Ruby’s lips. Weiss let the gap fall between them again at the lightened mood, immediately missing the soft, rhythmic pulse of Ruby’s warm aura against her own. Ruby’s aura was friendly and welcoming, just like she was. Weiss couldn’t help but wonder what her own felt like. Was it cold? Distant? Closed off? She would never know.

“I just... How do you set up a date? It’s so difficult!” Ruby threw her hands in the air in frustration, the sudden movement startling Weiss from her thoughts, “I spent hours planning this last night, like, I didn’t even *sleep*, and it still turned out terrible!”

‘Well, I wouldn’t say it was terrible’ Weiss thought to herself, *‘It had some charming moments.’*

“How would you do it?” Ruby asked. “If you were to plan a date?”

Weiss shared a grin at Ruby, raising a brow teasingly, “Now, if I told you that it’d ruin the surprise.”

“Aw come on Weiss,” Ruby whined, bringing out her signature puppy-pout face, “Please? I bet you’re like, the master of planning fancy dates.”

“Nope-” *Nope?* Oh gods, Ruby’s mannerisms were rubbing off on her too. She shut her eyes to avoid the pout facing her, “Absolutely not.”

“...Did you just say nope?” Ruby asked, shocked at the use of slang from the heiress. Weiss clamped her mouth shut as Ruby caught onto her slip up, “Did *Weiss Schnee*, Miss Big-fancy-words-I-can’t-pronounce, just say ‘*nope*’?”

“I did not.” Weiss growled in frustration, the feeling of fondness leaving her chest in a cold snap. She folded her arms tightly across her chest, a resounding snort punctuating her point. Ruby’s grin only grew bigger at the sight of Weiss’ irritation.

“Are you sure? Cause I could’ve sworn you said ‘nope’,” Ruby insisted, her silver eyes glinting in the patchy forest light, “Have I finally thawed the Ice Queen?”

“The only thing that’ll be thawed is the ice on your nose, if you don’t stop.” Weiss threatened with a snarl. It was hollow, of course. Weiss would never hurt her teammate. She’d much rather deal with her father’s wrath than hurt her own partner. However, it still worked.

Doubt flashed across Ruby’s eyes, “You wouldn’t.”

“Can you bet your nose on that?”

“Okay okay, so the ice queen is still in there,” Ruby came off her teasing high with a quiet giggle, her wide grin resting into a smaller, more content one. A brief silence fell between them, not lasting long before Ruby spoke up again, “But.. Did you enjoy the date, at all?”

Weiss hummed, the smell of fresh water and damp logs hitting her senses. She could hear a rushing stream nearby, hidden beneath the growth of the bushes and roots of the forest trail they were on. The trees were dense and thick, lush with bright green leaves. Healthy.

“I suppose you can organize something when you put your mind into it.” Weiss said, her ocean blue eyes scanning the forest around her, “But that remains to be seen.” Ruby frowned, her brows knitting together.

“Is that an insult or a compliment?” she asked.

“What do you think it is?” Weiss asked. Ruby opened her mouth to debate, before closing it with a pop. She hummed, itching her head as she thought. Weiss rolled her eyes, shaking her head with a huff.

“...A compliment?- Oh, hey we’re here already!”

Weiss lifted a brow, twisting around. Here? But, there was nothing of note on this section of path. It was almost the exact same as the rest of the trail they’d come from. The only way forward was ahead of them. “We are? But there’s nothing here.”

“You’re not looking close enough,” Ruby said cheekily, stepping over to a fallen tree branch that lay along the trail. It looked like it had been there some time, however the leaves along its twigs were still only turning orange. She lifted it, the wood crunching at the unwanted motion. Weiss grimaced, looking unsurely up at Ruby again.

“Surely you’re not serious?”

“Come on, it won’t break or anything,” Ruby persuaded, bouncing the log slightly in her hand to prove it’s strength. Instead, a strip of bark fell onto the ground, wriggling with wood worms and lice. Weiss’s face twisted in disgust, looking from the fallen bark to Ruby again. Ruby looked at the bark on the ground, pushing it away with her toe, “Uhh, except that part.”

“...Gods, *fine*.” Weiss grumbled, carefully moving beneath the old tree with reluctance. Ruby followed after her eagerly, dropping the rotting wood with a heavy thump before rustling forward and leading Weiss through the overgrowth. There was an old, flattened path beneath their feet, an old route long since taken back by the forest.

Weiss carefully followed Ruby, one hand covering her face from the sharp branches that snapped back as Ruby pushed past them. Branches and old leaves crunched beneath her heels. Eventually, the branches pulled back into the entrance of a clearing. Ruby stepped into it first, turning back to hold up the last few hanging leaves. Weiss closed her eyes as she pushed herself clear, squinting as she readjusted from the shade the leaves provided.

In front of them lay a vast lake, circled by the thick woodland and farmland as far as the eye could see. An old, disheveled boardwalk protruded out onto the surface of the water, made of chunky logs that rotted and strained under the threat of collapse.

A family of ducks quacked furiously as they swam beneath the walk, scaring away the hunting wrens that were poached above them. The water was practically untouched otherwise. The caustics of the sunlight reflected across the gray sand on the lake bed, sparkling rocks glinting at them from beneath. She could see schools of tiny fish scuttling away from the direction of the ducks, back towards deeper waters.

It was so peaceful.

“It’s pretty isn’t it?” Ruby whispered, afraid to break the tranquility of the scene, “I found it by accident when Zwei got off his leash.”

“It is,” Weiss breathed, her eyes following the small family of ducks as they swam across to a nearby bank of reeds. One was falling behind, swimming furiously to catch up with its family. The mother duck reached shore, turning to watch as each of her babies followed after her. She didn’t leave until the last duckling caught up, shaking its little tail free of water before racing to catch up with its family.

“The water kinda reminds me of your eyes...” Ruby hummed quietly, a blush growing on Weiss at the compliment, “That’s why I brought you here. Plus, I didn’t know what else to do, so.”

Weiss’ skin heated as she struggled to find an appropriate response. She was used to being complimented, she had been getting compliments all her life, so why was her brain shutting down when Ruby gave her one? Most of the compliments she had received in the past often felt empty or hollow, devoid of any meaning behind it. Ruby’s carried care, and love. Perhaps that was why she was struggling to respond.

She cleared her throat timidly, the heat across her cheeks growing more intense. She turned to find Ruby watching her with a warm glow in her eyes, “Well, I think your eyes are quite beautiful too.”

Ruby beamed brighter, a soft red forming along her cheekbones. Weiss took a cool breath, her heart beating like a drum in her chest. She wasn’t used to moments like this. These pure moments that fell between them and lingered in the air. It brought a sense of comfort to the heiress, something that she wasn’t used to.

She kept telling herself not to fall into this pit, that, if she found herself really falling in love with Ruby, she wouldn’t be able to climb back out again. It wasn’t her choice. In the end, it was Father who chose, and even if Weiss didn’t like his choice and tried to fight back she would lose. A memory came to her mind, piercing through her emotional barrier like an ice shard, her heart clenching painfully.

Long halls stretched far ahead of Weiss, perfectly polished marble and glass reflecting her face at every moment, watching her. Stained glass shone a rainbow of blues throughout the halls, painting the carpet in splotches of royals and cyans.

Her heels echoed across the empty space, her mind set on heading to one room in particular. A pair of double doors sat alone on the left side of the hall, the only room on that side of the building. Weiss came to a stop before them, hand hovering over the golden handle. She took a grounding breath, straightening her posture, before knocking.

The doors opened by themselves before her knuckle even met the wood, swinging open fully to reveal the office Weiss had grown to fear. Her father stood at the desk in the center, staring at her disapprovingly. Weiss felt cold sweat run down her back, gulping as she moved forward.

“I was requested?” Weiss asked, her voice carrying an air of fear.

Her father stood to his feet, walking around from behind his desk and stopping in front of his youngest daughter. Weiss met his gaze, finding familiar fury and hate burning behind them. Her eyes widened in surprise, before his hand lifted into the air.

Slap.

Weiss’ eyes watered as the stinging burned her face, a hand coming up to touch the raw area. She winced, looking to her father again for an explanation.

“I will not have my daughter eloping with other women!” He roared, his voice shaking Weiss. The heiress made a weak noise in fear, bringing her arms up to defend herself.

“I’m sorry!”

“Do not whimper pathetically! You are a Schnee! You do not grovel!” Jacques yelled. “You are not to talk to that girl again. I have made special arrangements for you to continue education at home under my watch. Am I understood?”

Weiss quickly wiped the forming tears from her eyes, trying to calm her rampaging emotions, "Y-yes sir."

Weiss took a short breath, flushing the painful images from her mind. Gods help her if Father ever found out about this. Weiss would never be allowed out of his sight again, never mind near another woman in her life. Knowing his temper, he'd marry her out to the first man that came forth, who had money of course. That was all that mattered to him; money and the family's public image. As long as the future heiress had a wealthy *husband* who would help the company in the future, he wouldn't care how Weiss felt.

What would happen to Ruby then? Would Weiss ever see her again? She'd be like a princess in a castle in those fairytales; Locked away, protected by an icy dragon who'd let no-one pass. Weiss' heart clenched. She didn't know if she wanted a life without Ruby, not after everything they'd gone through in Beacon..

"W-Weiss?" Ruby stammered, distracting the Schnee from her spiraling thoughts. Weiss hummed in response, watching the lake surface for a moment more before glancing over at Ruby. Ruby's face had turned scarlet as she fumbled nervously. Weiss frowned, placing a hand on her hip.

"What's wrong with you?" Weiss asked. Ruby looked up to her, mouth open, before closing it again. She attempted to form a sentence, however, only broken pieces of words came through. Weiss' frown grew deeper, "What? I can't hear you when you're mumbling like that."

"I said...C-can.. can I, uh.." Ruby closed her eyes, practically glowing, "K-k...iss... you?"

Weiss was stunned by the question, a pink color slowly spreading across her face. She bit her tongue, snorting quietly, before starting to laugh softly. Ruby's face changed from flushed to embarrassed, her eyes growing wide.

"H-Hey! Why are you laughing?! I'm serious!"

"I know- I know," Weiss took a breath, calming herself, "I've just never been *asked* to be kissed."

"O-oh," Ruby looked away, humiliation hanging over her like a shadow. Fingers tenderly grabbed her chin, turning her so that their eyes met.

"I didn't say no."

Ruby's skin warmed beneath her touch, her silver eyes locking with Weiss' sapphire ones. Eyes flicked down to Ruby's lips for a beat, before returning to her watching gaze. Something inside her was hungry, desperate, *excited*. Time was slowing to a standstill, Weiss' pulse growing louder in her ears with each tick.

Ruby was so close, but she was hesitating. Weiss licked the back of her lips, slowly growing impatient. Fingers hooked beneath the fabric of the old red cloak around Ruby's neck, before tugging, sealing the distance between them.

Ruby hummed against Weiss' lips in surprise, her hands moving to settle on her shoulders before receding slowly down to the base of her back. Weiss' grip was still tight around her cloak, not allowing the girl to pull back until *she* was ready to let go. If Ruby wouldn't kiss her, then Weiss would show her how it was done.

Ruby gently bite down on Weiss' lip, taking a well-timed breath between movements before diving back in for more. Weiss was surprisingly impressed as Ruby took the lead. She couldn't help but wonder where Ruby had learned to kiss like this. She was tender and shy, a stark difference to what the heiress was used to. She definitely preferred this.

Ruby squirmed beneath Weiss' grasp, running out of breath quickly mid-kiss. She lifted her hands to Weiss' shoulders, tapping them frantically as a sign for a time-out. Weiss reluctantly let go, leaning back softly while Ruby pulled back with a loud, breathless gasp, a trail of saliva snapping as she pulled away.

Weiss wiped the trail of wet down her chin with her sleeve, looking away in embarrassment as Ruby recollected herself. The brunette had stars in her eyes, touching her lips as if to feel they were still hers.

"Whoa."

Weiss grew embarrassed, her sleeve still covering her lips and her face stained red, "W-well? H-how was that?"

"That was... amazing," Ruby mumbled, looking back up at Weiss with a look of excitement, "Can we do it again?"

Weiss huffed, the blush growing deeper across her face and ears. "Would you stop asking..."

Ruby took a careful step towards her and Weiss immediately went quiet. The other girl came closer and the familiar sensation of her aura touched her skin; Ruby's expression was soft and her deep silver eyes asked a quiet question, patiently waiting for Weiss' approval.

"Ruby?-" Weiss breathed, the body above her blocking out the light. Ruby smiled lovingly down at her, leaning close enough for Weiss to feel a hot sigh tickle her cheek. Their noses were millimeters apart, eyes glued to each other. Seconds ticked past at an agonizingly slow pace. The world didn't matter anymore, at least not to the heiress.

Ruby pressed a gentle kiss to Weiss' parted lips, a calloused hand reaching up to stroke her cheek. The kiss was loving and tender, but cautious, as if she was afraid to push her limits. Weiss let a weak moan loose from the back of her throat, parting her lips. Ruby shyly pressed her tongue to meet Weiss'. Weiss let out a squeak in surprise, but didn't shy away. Her tongue met Ruby's halfway, her heart hammering at the sensation.

Weiss' world had become nothing but colors and sensations. Ruby's lips were soft and sweet against her own, her tongue careful but demanding. Roses, the same flowery smell that had clung to her jacket swallowed her whole, almost suffocating her. Her fingers sat against Ruby's cotton shirt, carefully working their way down her toned body.

Her body was warm, her entire frame tingling as Ruby slowly took control of her. Ruby pulled back for a moment, taking a cool breath. Weiss' vision was blurred, hot breaths escaping in pants as she tried to catch her lost air. Ruby didn't hesitate in her advance, moving to Weiss' soft neck to kiss just beneath her ear, nibbling gently. Weiss bit her lip, her eyes hazy. She was losing her mind.

Weiss' head drifted up as Ruby moved, nibbling tenderly at Weiss' throat. The heiress swallowed, her body heaving as it grew warmer. Her stomach felt like it was made of lava, practically melting her core. Ruby's hands drifted, one landing against her hip while the other reached further down. Weiss' legs trembled, whining as Ruby landed a sharper bite to her neck.

"R-Ru..Wh..." Weiss' words were lost in a whine as Ruby sucked on skin, drooped silver eyes watching her carefully. Her fingers kneaded at Ruby's cotton shirt, desperate. Her breaths were hot, warmed from the fire in her stomach. Gods, what was happening to her? She was practically melting...

A shrill whistle made both girls freeze.

Ruby jerked away from Weiss in an instant, immediately stiff with horror. Weiss pulled her hands back to her own chest, following Ruby's startled gaze with her own pissed one. Things had been starting to get good and now some

annoying whelp had ruined her chance. Her eyes landed on a tall figure emerging from the bushes, an ice cold wind rapidly quenching the fire in her core.

“What a show!” He clapped mockingly, dusting the leaves from his shoulders as he came closer, “Nothing gets me more fired up than two girls making out in the woods.”

“Torchwick.” Ruby growled, voice low and dangerous. Ruby quickly got into a protective stance in front of Weiss, her arm drawn out to defend her at any cost. Weiss shook her head clear of her wavy vision, her hand reaching for Myrtenaster, only to grasp empty air.

Her heart fell into her stomach. She hadn’t expected to need Myrtenaster, so she had left it in their dorms this morning. A quick glance to Ruby’s back showed that she hadn’t brought Crescent Rose either.

“The one and only. Nice to see you again, Red,” Roman feigned happily, swinging his cane through the air before planting it into the ground. He leaned to the side so that Weiss could see him past Ruby, tipping his hat to Weiss as he did, “Snow Pea.”

Weiss narrowed her eyes, activating her aura across her body, “What do you want?”

Ruby glanced at Weiss as she emerged from behind the caped girl and stood beside her, flashing a look that Weiss didn’t catch before turning back to Roman. Weiss could protect herself, she was still a huntress even without Myrtenaster. Roman hummed, plucking the cigar from his mouth and throwing it into the water. Ruby and Weiss both glared at him.

“What I want is simple, m’dear,” Torchwick said, watching the cigar sink into the water before looking back at the two girls. Both Huntresses grew tense, ready for a fist fight if it came down to it. Roman stopped a few feet in front of both girls, eyes looking up and down Weiss, before pointing a gloved finger at her, “I want you.”

Weiss blinked in surprise, her semblance primed along her fingertips as she mentally prepared herself to fight. Ruby growled, having noticed Torchwick’s line of sight, “Weiss? Why?”

Roman laughed, “If you must know, I need her to help me with something very big and important. So, I’ll be taking her now.”

“You’re insane if you think she’ll just go with you.”

“Oh Little Red, always the hero.” He clicked his fingers, the trees and bushes coming to life as White Fang burst from their hiding places. They were surrounded in seconds, faunus of every type circling them as they waited for further orders. “But you don’t get a choice in the matter.”

Weiss flicked around to defend Ruby’s back, her eyes wide in unease. There was no way they could take them all on without their weapons. It was suicide.

“How did you even find us?” Weiss asked over her shoulder, black glyphs sparkling in the palms of her hands.

“Your friend from the market isn’t very loyal,” Roman hummed, picking at his chin, “Sold you out the second she saw the Lien. Sly fox, eh?”

Weiss turned to look at Ruby, who’s face had shifted into a look of betrayal, “Amber...?”

She hesitated, looking back at Weiss with an unspoken apology in her eyes. Weiss looked away. It wasn't Ruby's fault, but this explained the way she had been feeling in the markets.

"Now," Roman clapped his hands together, "As much as I'd *love* to hang around and keep chatting, we've got a schedule to keep. Let's wrap this up, boys."

The faunus around them crept closer, their feet crunching over dead leaves and twigs, brandishing weapons in their hands from behind their cloaks. Weiss narrowed her eyes nervously, her eyes flickering to each of the closest faunus. There were seven on this side at least, and three with guns. If she used her glyphs right she could throw those three elsewhere-

Suddenly, there was a sharp prick in her leg. She hissed in surprise, looking down to look at what had just hit her. Sticking out of her calf was what looked like an oversized thumbtack, a dark red spiked end sticking out the end. Her head quickly grew woozy, exhaustion climbing across her body. Her eyes darted around for the source, finding a deer faunus still hidden in the bushes nearby with what looked like a blowgun in its hands.

"Oh *no*," she croaked, staggering against Ruby's back. The reaper turned around in concern, her eyes landing on a now swaying Weiss. The heiress could hardly see, her vision swimming in waves as she struggled to stay awake against the darts dosage.

"Ru-.." She attempted to wheeze a warning to one of the Ruby that had doubled in her vision in front of her, but her tongue felt like it was made of lead. Black clouds began to form in the corners of her eyes, her knees suddenly giving out beneath her.

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"Weiss?!" Ruby cried out, catching the nearly unconscious girl as she fell forward into her arms. They collapsed to the floor, panic seizing Ruby's chest as she cradled the slumped body of her partner in her arms. Weiss was fighting to keep her eyes open, her blue eyes dulled as she began to doze off. Ruby felt a flare of fear clench her heart, looking back to Roman in rage.

Weiss' fingers weakly tugged on Ruby's corset, "Ru...run..."

"*What did you do to her?!*" she roared, clutching Weiss' head tightly to her chest as the Schnee finally fell asleep. She shook Weiss lightly, begging her to wake up beneath her breath. Roman came closer, unthreatened by the sight of the furious huntress.

"Don't worry your little head, Red. She's just having a nap, hopefully," he hummed, nodding to some of the grunts, who moved forward without hesitation, "Now, say goodbye to your girlfriend."

Ruby looked up as some of the masked men came forth, reaching to pull Weiss from Ruby's tight embrace. "*No!*" She growled loudly, her silver eyes glowing in anger as she spat, "*Stay AWAY from her!!*"

Ruby hadn't noticed Roman pressing his cane against her back before it was too late, a round of paralyzing dust rushing through her body with a scream. She let out a grunt of pain as it stopped, slouching over Weiss' form protectively. She glared at the grunts, an almost animalistic glow in her eyes.

"Don't- *Don't* touch...her," Ruby warned between breaths. Her body was sore, and suffering the aftereffects of the paralysis blast. She could hardly even breathe. Roman lifted her body up by the hood, pulling her away from Weiss

with a violent jerk. Ruby's stomach twisted as Weiss' head thumped on the ground, struggling to get free from Roman's grasp, "Weiss..! *Weiss! Let go! Weiss, wake up!*"

"Oh stop your screaming. There's no point in it," Roman said sickly, sticking another dart into the side of Ruby's neck. "These tranquiliser darts are potent enough to take down Elephants." Ruby froze as she felt the dart's fluids flowing beneath her skin, landing roughly on the ground as Torchwick let go of her hood. Her vision was swimming, waving in and out and making her sick.

"Don't worry though, her aura will prevent an overdose of any kind. You, though... Such a shame your aura's taken a beating..."

Ruby crawled weakly against the ground, grinding her teeth as she pulled herself along the dirt. She reached forward to try and grab Weiss, her hand hovering in the air before hitting the ground weakly with a dusty thud. She could see the masked faunus tying the heiress up roughly with ropes, throwing her around like she was trash before picking her up and flinging her over their shoulder.

Roman twirled his cane onto his shoulder as he walked away, "Thanks for the show, Red. Now play your part and die like every other huntress in history."

"Wei...Weiss..." She sobbed, her vision growing dark as one of the White Fang got closer. A hard, painful kick landed against her ribs, a loud crack coming from her chest followed by a fizzle as her aura strained. Ruby coughed painfully, laying limp in the dirt. A wheeze escaped her lungs, her aura frail. She watched as the black cloaked people disappeared into the forest again, tears falling from her face.

"No....no.." Ruby croaked the word over and over, sobbing racking her body as she slowly passed out.

You are my sunshine, my only sunshine

You make me happy when skies are gray

You'll never know dear, how much I love you

Please don't take my sunshine away.

The other night dear, as I lay sleeping

I dreamed I held you in my arms

But when I awoke, dear, I was mistaken

So I hung my head and I cried

You Are My Sunshine, The Phantoms

CHAPTER 5 (5.7k) (Posted.)

Blake watched from her bed as Yang strode back and forth around the dorm room with her scroll clenched tightly in her hand. She'd been pacing in circles for the past ten minutes, moving from gnawing her knuckles to checking her scroll. The little red alarm clock between their bunks flashed the time *18:49* in minimal red digits. It had been fourteen hours since Ruby and Weiss had left on their date, and neither of them were reacting to messages or calls. They'd gone completely silent.

"They're probably just ignoring you," Blake tried to reason again, her amber eyes following the concerned elder sister as she flattened rings into the carpet, "It's not very late, they could've gone to a movie or something."

Yang shook her head furiously, one of her hands holding her fringe back from her eyes. Her gaze was locked on her scroll as she typed out messages, hoping for a response from either of her teammates, "No- No, something feels wrong. Ruby wouldn't ignore me. I've called her thirteen times, and she still won't answer, and the last time she saw my message was four hours ago. Four hours!"

"*Thirteen* phone calls?" Blake lifted an eyebrow, an unimpressed look on her face, " She probably turned her scroll off so you'd stop calling her.."

"Blake you're really *not* helping," Yang growled, her fingers curling into claws as she pulled at her own hair in frustration.

"I'm trying to be reasonable, Yang. You need to calm down."

"*I AM-*" Yang roared abruptly, a sudden violent red flashing in her eyes. She closed her eyes, the angry colour in them fading back to lilac before she let out a chuckling breath, "I.. am kinda calm."

'*Clearly.*' Blake thought to herself, watching as flames rose off the ends of her long, blonde mane of hair.

“Ruby isn’t a child anymore. She doesn’t need babysitting. Besides, she’s not exactly alone,” Blake repeated for what felt like the hundredth time. Yang huffed.

“I know that, but-”

“And both Ruby and Weiss are some of the best huntresses in the school.”

“Yeah, but-”

“And they’ve been partners for over a year.”

“*I know!* But something just feels *wrong*, Blake!” Yang cried in frustration, her lilac eyes settling on Myrtenaster and Crescent Rose that sat alone by the door, “Like, why wouldn’t they bring their weapons with them? Anything could happen- ugh I knew I should’ve convinced Ruby out of liking Weiss..”

Blake sighed, standing up and blocking Yang’s path, “*Yang*, look at me.” The blonde looked up from her scroll, her eyes swimming in hot dread and nervousness. Blake's were quiet and gathered, but they held a stern gaze, fixated on her partner in an attempt to calm Yang’s overthinking mind. Yang hesitated, her eyes glued to Blake in a beat. Blake lifted her hands to place them on either side of Yang’s face, the brunette’s skin warm to the touch.

“I know you’re worried, but Weiss and Ruby are more than capable of handling themselves. They’re not children,” Blake said softly, trying to take the edge off of her partner, “It was Ruby’s choice to bring Weiss on a date, not ours. We couldn’t have stopped her if we wanted to. You need to have a little more faith in your sister.”

Yang’s entire frame stood still as she listened, one hand rising to grasp Blake’s wrist. Her lilac orbs were still full of anxiety and hesitation, debating Blake’s words for a moment. For a minute, Blake thought she’d gotten through to her ox-headed partner, until she let out a tired sigh. Her eyes held an unspoken guilt, but Blake caught it. A soft frown tugged at her lips.

“Yang..”

“I need to make sure,” Yang mumbled quietly, gently lifting Blake’s hands off her face and turning to face the door. Her shoulders were slouched, the flames that had been glowing at the base of her hair extinguished by a walk of

concern-driven guilt. Blake watched as Yang reached for a jacket to pull over her body, and to hide Ember and Celica, which were now securely attached to her wrists. Yang pulled out the cuffs, making sure her gauntlets wouldn't get snagged on the coat.

"I almost lost Ruby once, Blake," Yang said solemnly. The blonde turned to face her partner, who hadn't moved from where Yang had left her, "I ignored the feeling I had in the woods as a child all those years ago. I'm not ignoring it now."

Yang lifted Gambol Shroud from the foot of Blake's bed, who looked at her own weapon apprehensively. She pointed the weapon's grip to its owner, a deep, serious frown on her face, "Now, am I going alone or does my partner want to join me?"

Blake's golden orbs flickered from Yang to the hilt of Gambol Shroud, then back to Yang. They locked eyes, neither of them wavering as they stared each other down. Blake's will broke first, her feline ears flattening in defeat beneath her bow, a heavy sigh escaping her. She reached out for her weapon, taking it from Yang and flipping it onto her back.

"Fine," she grumbled, tightening the black bow atop her head with a tight tug, "But if I turn out to be right, you can be the one to explain to Ruby why we're there."

Yang smiled softly, gratitude shining in her eyes, "Thank you, Blake."

The pair left the dorm swiftly, rushing down the flights of stairs that led to the main lobby of the building. Yang's mind was distracted as she ran, billions of scenarios flying through her head of what could've happened to her younger sister. The mere thought of Ruby getting hurt made her sick to the pits of her stomach.

Blake, on the other hand, could sense Yang's overwhelming fear as she ran beside her. A concerned look had settled on her face, watching her partner as they made their way down the final flight of stairs. Yang could get... unpredictable when she was upset, which meant she lost all means of rational thought.

She had followed along because she knew Yang would need a tether. If she didn't have one, who knows what she would do if she got angry, or Gods forbid, she got upset.

As they came to the ground floor, a yelp of surprise caught Blake's well-tuned ears, her amber eyes set on a connecting path in front of them. From the corner of her eye, she spotted a glint of crimson hair heading towards the

weapon locker storage, who Blake quickly recognised as their neighbour, Pyrrha Nikos. The crimsonette was in a loose, rusty coloured hoodie with Milo and Akouo on her back, and was oblivious to the Yang-sized mass running forward, towards the exit behind her.

“Yang watch-” Blake’s warning came too late.

Yang and Pyrrha collided with a hard thud. The impact sent both titan-built girls flying opposite ways, now sprawled on the floor, rubbing their heads. Blake winced at the sight, her black ribbon leaning back on her head as her ears folded.

“Sorry, Pyrrha,” Yang mumbled as she got up, rubbing her lower back where she had fallen, “I didn’t see you there, and I’d love to stay and chat but we’re in a rush.”

“Yang,” Blake scolded, watching her partner as she rushed to the main door. The blonde ignored her partner’s voice, instead immediately rushing over to the airship timetable pinned to the nearest notice board.

The faunus sighed, looking back as Pyrrha arrived beside her, a worried look on her face, “Is there something wrong? Yang seems rather... distressed.”

Blake nodded, watching as Yang paced around in circles on her scroll, talking to someone rather loudly about the next airship leaving Beacon. The ravenette turned to the crimson-haired girl with a heavy sigh, “Ruby and Weiss aren’t responding to her. She’s freaked out over it and won’t listen to reason.”

Pyrrha tilted her head slightly, “Ruby and Weiss? Did Ruby finally ask her on a date?”

Blake blinked in surprise, looking at the taller student beside her in shock, “She told you about it?”

Pyrrha hummed, a silent chuckle jerking her body, “I picked up on it and asked Ruby some time ago.” The crimsonette frowned, glancing back at Yang in concern again as she let out an annoyed yell. “If they’re on a date, then why is Yang so worried?”

“She calls it her ‘sisterly instinct’,” Blake explained, perking up as Yang came closer again. The blonde’s hair was glowing with heat, but she looked distressed rather than angry.

“There’s only one more ship out of Vale tonight due to a storm. We have to go now,” she explained. Blake crossed glances with Pyrrha before nodding to her partner.

“Then let’s go. We don’t want to miss it.”

“Please allow me to come with you,” Pyrrha hummed, stepping beside Yang to rest a hand on her shoulder, “You never know what might happen. I was trained in tracking, it might be useful.”

Yang thought for a moment, searching Pyrrha’s eyes. A serious, caring emerald stare was all she could see, one of someone who was worried for her friends. Yang sent Blake a side glance, silently asking for confirmation. The feline nodded.

“Alright,” Yang hummed, tightening her hoodie over her shoulders. She took a breath, the glow in her hair dimming as a small, weak smile emerged, “Thank you.”

Blake shared a smile with Pyrrha, before steeling her emotions. She stepped past Yang, heading towards the front door with a new air of seriousness, “Come on. Let’s go find our teammates.”

The three students rushed to the airship docks, the evening warmth shifting to a colder, damper air as rough winds began to pick up. The sea below was starting to grow rough, foamy waves crashing against the rocks of the academy.. The flight felt long and dragged out, like time was tormenting them with anxieties of what could have happened. Yang had practically bitten her nails to stubs by the time they arrived in Vale’s airports.

Yang was the first off the ship, quickly scanning her student ID against the check-in scanner before pushing her way through the gates. Blake and Pyrrha had to run to keep up with her, muttering “excuse me, pardon me” every few seconds as they weaved throughout the dense crowds.

“Yang, wait!” Blake called to her partner as they finally escaped the busy airport, “Do you even know where you’re going?!”

Yang, who had been ahead by a considerable amount, stopped in her tracks and faced Blake and Pyrrha, “No.”

“Of course not,” Blake remarked quietly, “Did you check the scroll signal?”

Yang tilted her head quizzically, “The what now?”

“Our scrolls all have GPS trackers in them,” Pyrrha explained briefly, “They ping their locations to the school in case of an emergency during missions.”

Yang reached into her pocket and pulled out the small device, flicking it open and navigating through the screens until she found what she was looking for, “Wow, I didn’t know this even existed.”

Blake smirked lightly, a twinkle in her golden eyes, “How do you think we found you the night you wrecked The Fisher’s Keep?”

“The bar on the docks? Wasn’t that the one that partly burned down a while ago?” Pyrrha asked innocently as Yang scrolled around the map of Vale on her scroll. Blake shrugged her shoulders.

“Who knows?”

“Got them!” Yang exclaimed, turning her scroll around to show Blake and Pyrrha, “Vale National Trail. Not a bad spot, sis’.”

“Let’s go then. We only have an hour before the airship goes back to the school,” Pyrrha said. Yang and Blake nodded.

The National Trail wasn’t too far, but it was on the very edge of the city's border. There were rare cases of grimm wandering into the deepest forests, especially the flying types. Ravagers were the most common, hanging from the darkest trees to attack scared campers. While they were small and weak on their own, any cry that they would make would attract more, as would the fear and panic of the attack. Once there was a group of them, you were better off running.

The start of the trail had been renovated to a small campsite for that reason. As long as you stayed within the border, you had a better chance of being protected. It was a wide open area that served as a center for the forest. Picnic benches were scattered around, while small shops lined the edge just before the trail began. A nice place in the day, but eerie once the sun began to set.

It was practically abandoned by the time Yang, Blake and Pyrrha got there. Wasps hung around the trash cans as they tried to suck whatever sugar they could from the rubbish, buzzing loudly in their groups. Yang looked around as she walked, Blake and Pyrrha tailing closely behind her.

“Something’s not right,” Pyrrha mumbled quietly, her hand twitching to grab Milo from her back, “It seems too...”

“Quiet.” Blake finished, pulling her ribbon from her feline ears so she could listen better. She’d explained her faunus traits to JNPR some time ago, but it still felt strange for the ravenette to reveal herself at times. She reserved it for times where it was necessary, and this was one of those times. Her sleek black ears swiveled in the air. “Far too quiet.”

“I told you something happened,” Yang said, looking up as she found herself at the start of the trail path. A man was walking towards them, an unsettled look on his face. Yang moved to meet him, lifting her hand to grab his attention. “Excuse me sir!”

The man looked towards them at the shout, stopping as Yang jogged up to him. He smiled, “Can I help you?”

“We’re looking for two girls, about this high,” Yang lifted her hand in the air, stopping at her shoulder, “One of them has a red cape and the other has really long white hair and an attitude?”

The man frowned, looking back on the trail he had come from, lost in thought, “A few hours ago, maybe? They weren’t very far down the trail.”

“A few hours ago?” Blake asked, a hand on Yang’s shoulder stopping her from bolting without them, “Have you not seen them since?”

“Not that I can remember, but I would’ve assumed they left a long time ago. There was no sign of them on the way back down,” he explained, his frown shifting into one of nerves, “There was no sign of anything on the way back down. Almost like the whole forest had been swept clean.”

Blake and Yang swapped gazes, before Blake let go of the blonde. The two girls raced up the dirt path, leaving Pyrrha to utter a quick “Thank you!” to the man before rushing to catch up.

A silent forest meant that there were Grimm around.

“I knew I shouldn’t have let them go without their weapons!” Yang whined, racing along the path. Blake frowned, her ears still twisting around for any type of sounds belonging to Ruby or Weiss.

“Stay calm Yang. We don’t want to attract any Grimm towards Ruby and Weiss,” Blake said, the ribbon attached to Gambol Shroud following behind her, “Let’s just find them first and get out.”

“Agreed,” Pyrrha spoke, her spear and shield now comfortably in her hands, “If they’re hurt we’ll need to escape quickly.”

“Right, right,” Yang slowed to a jog, her eyes moving from her scroll screen to the area around them, “The scroll says they’re right here. Can anyone see them?”

Blake looked around cautiously, stepping away from Yang to scout out the small area. There were footprints everywhere, any evidence of Weiss and Ruby’s presence destroyed beneath other hikers’ feet. She grumbled in annoyance, “I can’t see anyone. Are you sure they’re here?”

“They have to be,” Yang called, looking around, while glancing to the sky in nerves, “Keep looking.”

Pyrrha knelt beside a set of tire tracks, gently running her hand across the soil. There were multiple tracks of the same type, all emerging from the same spot in the overgrowth. The huntress frowned in suspicion, moving to follow them to the source.

“Find something?” Blake asked, drawn towards Pyrrha’s actions. The crimsonette hummed, running her fingers along the sides of the tracks.

“Fresh tire tracks. From a motorbike from the looks of it,” she explained, standing up and pushing the collapsed log in front of her out of the way. The rotten piece of wood fell to the side, crunching off the ground as it split apart.

Yang moved over at the sound, her eyes staring at the hidden path in surprise. Blake crouched down, her eyes narrowed as she found tracks in the soil. Crushed plants and twigs led through the path, belonging to two people.

“They went this way. C’mon,” Blake said urgently, pushing through the twigs and overgrowth. Yang followed after her partner swiftly, with Pyrrha trailing after the blonde.

Yang winced as she pushed through the bushes, sharp twigs and thorns scraping off her arms as she pushed her way through. She kept her eyes glued on Blake as she shoved her way through the overgrowth in front of her, the feline’s ears perked forward and her eyes down as she tracked their lost teammates.

Blake broke into an opening ahead of them, turning and holding the bushes back for Yang and Pyrrha to follow through. Yang burst from the trees like a bear, eyes searching around quickly for her baby sister. Her eyes immediately landed on the lake ahead of them, before following the shoreline.

Pyrrha followed after Yang, her eyes immediately landing on a still black form lazily hidden in front of one of the trees. Her emerald eyes flashed with worry, turning to face Yang, “Yang! Over there!”

The blonde turned to face the tree Pyrrha was pointing at, her stomach twisting into knots once she saw their team leader on the ground, “Ruby!”

Yang rushed towards her sister, sliding to a stop beside her, heart hammering wildly. She fell to her knees, scooping her arms beneath Ruby to pull her close to her chest. Ruby’s head lolled into Yang’s chest, her mouth drawn open as she slept in her sister’s arms. Her eyes were red and puffy, like she’d been crying.

“Is she okay?” Pyrrha asked, crouching beside Yang with worry. Yang nodded silently, swallowing the lump of relief in her throat. She cradled Ruby like a lifeline, hands shaking.

“Her aura is low, but I think she’s okay,” Yang took a trembling breath, facing Pyrrha’s concerned emerald gaze, “Weiss...?”

“Gone,” Blake said as she emerged from the brushes, standing behind Pyrrha. She held a scroll in one hand, and her tiara in the other, cracked in half. “This was all I could find of her.”

“What do you mean gone?!” Yang yelled. Blake’s ears fell back at Yang’s shout, placing the cracked scroll into her pocket before crossing her arms.

“I mean she was taken, Yang. There’s footprints everywhere.” Blake gestured to the prints in the kicked up and ruined grass with a nod. Yang looked over to the caked mud with a tightly knit brow, “They were attacked, or jumped by someone.”

“Who would go after them?” Pyrrha asked, pressing her hand to one of the prints. Blake sighed, rubbing her arm. She already suspected the answer once she saw the tire tracks on the main trail. Yang noticed Blake’s unrest with a frown, lifting a brow in suspicion.

“Blake? What’s on your mind?”

“I don’t know yet, but.. Weiss is a Schnee,” Blake looked up to meet Yang’s lilac glare, her ears pulled back as her anxieties surfaced, “Who do you know that holds a grudge towards them?”

Yang narrowed her eyes, “The Faunus.”

“You think the White Fang took her?” Pyrrha asked, her eyes moving between Blake and Yang as they communicated wordlessly with each other. Blake only shrugged, looking at the cracked hair piece in her hand. Her eyes were full of distress, and she was tense. Like she was reliving some memory she had repressed. Yang frowned, her eyes casting back down to Ruby as she thought.

“Why now?” Yang asked aloud, stroking the hair from his sister’s forehead tenderly. Blake shook her head.

“I’m not sure. It might not even be them, but if it was... she might not...”

A sad shroud fell over the girls, already knowing where Blake's train of thought had been heading. The White Fang weren't called extremists for nothing. They would do anything to get back at the SDC. Blake still had nightmares from the times Adam had made... examples of those who'd failed him. Their corpses had been left to rot on poles on the Mantle border, a show of what they could do. It had made national news. Several SDC workers' bodies displayed publicly, along with a warning to the family who ran the business.

"Don't lose hope just yet," Pyrrha said carefully, cutting the falling sorrow that was forming around the three girls. "We need to get Ruby back to Beacon and let Headmaster Ozpin know what happened."

"Ruby will know what happened," Blake pitched in, looking down at Ruby in concern. Yang slowly nodded, reaching one arm beneath Ruby's legs before standing up with a grunt. She watched her sister carefully, a crease in her brows at her sister's lack of response.

"Okay," Yang nodded, looking between Blake and Pyrrha, "We get back to Beacon, get Ruby help. Then we beat up whoever dared to mess with our family."

A loud caw cried through the forest, the voice bouncing off the trees. Goosebumps rose along Yang's neck as she looked around. Blake and Pyrrha pulled their weapons from their backs in an instant, changing both into their gun modes.

"Ravagers," Blake informed, her ears twisting around the air wildly, while she pinpointed them, "A group of them are coming our way!"

"Go Yang! We'll cover you and Ruby!" Pyrrha called out, cocking the shotgun form of Milo in her hands. Yang hesitated for a moment before looking down at Ruby. She couldn't do anything with Ruby in her arms, and they were running out of time to get back to the airship docks before the last ship left. She nodded, tightening her grip on her sister's body.

"Right!" Yang took off in a sprint, breaking through the bushes they'd entered through. Blake and Pyrrha followed closely, eyes scanning the tree crowns as they broke through to the main trail. A loud shriek echoed through the air, a Ravager flying above them.

Pyrrha lifted her gun and shot twice, blasting the creature's head off its shoulder with two explosive cartridges. It fell to the ground with a soft thump, the crimsonette clicking the empty shells out of her gun before loading two new rounds into it. Blake appeared from the shadows behind her, slashing another out of the air with Gambol Shroud.

Yang grit her teeth as she dodged out of the way of the attacking Grimm, holding onto Ruby's limp body as tight as she could. The birds dove for her, sharp beaks aiming to hurt Yang as the blonde danced around them clumsily. As she sidestepped out of the way of another, her foot slipped on a stone. The blonde stumbled to catch her footing with a yelp, spotting a Ravager lining up to attack her, launching itself at the given opportunity.

"Shit," Yang hissed, turning and exposing her back as the bird went for her. A gunshot rang past her ear, deafening the blonde with a cry. She staggered to the side, looking at the place where the Grimm had been shot. Black particles settled to the ground, burning like charred embers. Yang took a breath, shaking the high pitched ringing from her head.

"...ang! YANG!" Blake yelled louder, concerned gold eyes watching her partner. The brawler rubbed her ear off her shoulder roughly, forcing out a pained smile. Blake's ears swiveled anxiously, but her eyes grew less fearful. Yang shook her head once more, the pitched whines and pains fading as her aura got to work.

"I'm fine, I'm fine! Keep going!" Yang hollered, starting back into another run. They hadn't been far from the main camping area, which likely had Grimm traps in case any stray monsters wandered too close for comfort to the camp at night. Yang dodged to the side again, digging her toe into the dry earth as she pushed herself to run faster. Gods, if only she had Ruby's speed right now.

Pyrrha lifted her thumb, closing one eye as she aimed for one of the bigger Ravagers that had appeared through the tree branches with a screech. She adjusted Milo in her grip, finding the right handhold, before throwing her spear through the air with practiced precision. The blade pierced through the Grimm, before stopping mid-air and returning to its owner with the aid of her semblance.

Blake appeared behind Pyrrha, shooting another few rounds at a group of smaller Grimm, before disappearing into the shadows. She appeared again beside Yang as they passed through the entrance to the forest trail, turning to watch the Grimm as they flew towards the small group. Pyrrha came to a stop beside Blake, morphing Milo into its shotgun form before taking aim. Blake shifted Gambol Shroud, eyes narrowed.

However, just as the monsters were about to break the threshold of the trail, several bolts of lightning burst from the trees, disintegrating any of the Grimm that touched it. The birds shrieked, fading into black mist instantaneously. Blake lifted her sight to look at the trunks of the trees, finding black boxes secured tightly to them. Tesla gates, made specifically for Grimm.

Yang sniffed the air, “Eugh, that reeks!”

“Let’s hurry and get going,” Blake hummed, placing her weapon back over her shoulder before untying the bow from her wrist and placing it back over her cat ears. Pyrrha clicked Milo into safe mode, locking Milo to Akouo and latching them both to her back.

“I’ll message the rest of JNPR,” Pyrrha said, picking her scroll from her back, “There’s still a chance that Weiss managed to escape and went back to the school for help.”

A loud boom came from overhead, followed by the sound of distant lightning. Blake’s hair stood on end, her cat ears laid flat beneath her bow. Yang shivered as a gust of chilled wind blew through the air. She started into another jog, “Let’s hope we can bribe the pilot into driving.”

The airship back felt like it took a lifetime to get to Beacon, and the growing storm shook the airship as it flew. They just barely managed to get back to the school before the brutal part of the storm hit, bringing down icy rain and hail stones like bullets from the sky. Yang had pulled off her coat and wrapped it around Ruby in her arms to make sure her baby sister wasn’t hurt any more than she already was by the cold.

They had made quite a sight when they burst into the infirmary of the school, petrifying the nurses as well as the few teachers that had been lingering around: three second-year students drenched to their skin, holding the ‘prestigious’ Ruby Rose limp in their arms. The head nurse rushed forward in a heartbeat, asking what had happened as she led Yang to the nearest open bed, while the other nurses and teachers handed Blake and Pyrrha a towel.

That had been over an hour ago.

Now, Yang sat worriedly by her sister's side, holding her limp hand as she slept. She watched as Ruby’s chest rose and fell, a water drip attached to her left arm. Blake sat on the opposite side of Yang, eyes flickering from Ruby to Yang in worry. The nurses had already taken Ruby’s blood for a test, as well as done a physical check.

She had some lightning burns on her lower back, as well as faintly bruised ribs. The nurses suspected the burns had come from close contact to ignited Dust, but they would heal quickly with some rest. As for why she was asleep and not waking up, they weren’t sure. That was why they had taken blood.

“We need to tell Ozpin. If the White Fang are attacking students they need to know.” Blake hummed sadly, tugging the fleece blanket tighter around her damp shoulders. Yang huffed, tracing circles around Ruby’s hand.

“Maybe now that Weiss is gone, they’ll leave us alone,” she said grumpily, smiling slightly as a snore broke through Ruby’s slumber. Blake’s ears fell back slightly, an upset look on her features.

“Yang, Weiss is a part of our team. We can’t just abandon her,” Blake growled. Yang sighed, pushing her hair back behind her ears in defeat.

“Yeah, yeah I know. I didn’t mean that... I just,” Yang sighed again, rubbing her face in distress. Blake frowned again, reaching over to brush her fingers over Yang’s hand. The blonde looked up, the bags under her eyes tainting her usually vibrant violet eyes.

“I know you didn’t.” Blake tilted her head as a nurse began to approach them again, holding a clipboard with a relieved look on her face. Yang turned to the tall woman as she came to a stop beside her, nodding in greeting.

“Well, the good news is that she will recover fully within the next few hours. We’ve administered aura boosters so her wounds should be completely gone by morning.” She began, lifting the pages as she called out the information. Yang and Blake crossed glances.

“So then,” Yang looked to the nurse, worry still lingering on her face, “Why won’t she wake up?”

“She seems to have been injected with a heavy dosage of Midazolam-”

Yang’s face twisted to one of confusement, “Mida-*what?*”

“*Midazolam.*” The woman repeated, “It’s commonly used during surgeries to put patients to sleep. Ruby was exposed to a rather large dosage of it.”

“So, she’ll be okay?” Blake asked, noticing the conflicted expression flickering across Yang’s eyes. She was hunched over slightly, eyes staring emptily to the floor as she lost herself in thought. Her hands were wringing together, molding little grooves into her tanned skin. Blake frowned again.

“Yes, although we’re not sure when she’ll wake up. I’m sure she’ll do so when she’s ready,” the nurse explained with a practised smile, before quickly checking the bag of fluids that were being fed through a drip in Ruby’s arm. She gently adjusted it, before stepping away and bowing her head slightly. “Don’t hesitate to call if you need anything.”

“Thank you,” Blake mumbled, forcing a smile for the nurse. The woman smiled back weakly, before turning and leaving out the main doors. Blake looked back to Yang with an uncertain look, sharing her thoughts. If this happened to Ruby, then what had happened to Weiss? They hadn’t found any clues as to where she’d been taken, or if she was even still alive. She could’ve been anywhere in Remnant by now.

“We’re back.”

Yang and Blake looked up as Pyrrha led team JNPR into the infirmary. They were soaked down to their underwear, their clothes dark as water dripped onto the cool floor. Pyrrha had a towel in her hand, drying the ends of her ponytail as she walked closer. Jaune looked concerned, eyes locked on his sleeping friend on the bed, hooked onto a drip and a ventilator. Nora and Ren followed in behind.

“How’s Ruby?” Jaune asked nervously, moving to stand beside Yang as he took in the scene. Ruby looked so small tucked beneath layers of blankets and towels, tubes attached to her arm and nose. Yang took a deep breath, straightening her back.

Sitting back down into the chair with a heavy sigh, she slapped her hands off her damp thighs in hopes of getting them to dry a little more.

“Doc said she’ll be okay,” she responded, eyes not moving from her sister’s sleeping body. Her gaze hardened, a glow of hatred surrounding her, “She was put to sleep by whoever attacked them.”

“That’s horrible,” added Pyrrha, her arms wrapped around herself as she took in the sight of her friend. Yang huffed angrily, folding her arms across her chest.

“When I get my hands on the filthy monster that did this,” she growled lowly, her eyes lighting up blood-red. Blake shifted nervously in her seat as she reached up to fumble with the corner of the towel on her shoulders. She cleared her throat, ending the growing silence that had followed Yang’s threats, “Any signs of Weiss?”

“No,” Jaune sighed, resting his hands on his hips as he stood, “We asked security to check the cameras on campus for her, but she’s nowhere to be seen.” He lifted his hand to run it through his shaggy locks of blonde hair. “We’re not allowed to leave the school grounds for the next few days either.”

“All airships have been grounded due to the storm,” Ren quickly explained, standing beside Jaune. “It’s only getting worse.” He held a towel over his shoulders, drying his soaked shoulder-length hair with his hands. Rain thundered against one of the windows, followed by a distant roll of thunder that made the room shiver.

“Well, we’re not giving up on her. We’ll get her back,” Pyrrha comforted, resting a light hand on Blake’s shoulder. The faunus looked up to the crimsonette in thanks, pulling the towel from around herself and folding it on her lap.

Would they get Weiss back alive, though? When Blake had been part of the White Fang, she’d witnessed many enemies of the organisation being traded to slave farms, other than being executed to set an example in front of any faunus who wanted to watch. She’d already seen past members of the Schnee family hanged for their crimes against the Faunus, members that hadn’t been part of Weiss’ immediate family. Who knows what they’d do to the heiress. Her fingers dug into the fibers of the towel in fear.

Blake sucked in a breath, “Let’s just hope we’re not too late.”

CHAPTER 6 (5.2k) (Posted.)

“White”

(trigger warning; graphic descriptions of pain and mild sexual harassment ahead)

The first thing Weiss picked up on when she came back to her senses was the smell of cold steel. The harsh, pungent, wet odor invaded her nostrils, yanking her from the fuzziness of her subconscious mind. It smelt horrid, like some alleyway in the scums of Mantle, plagued with rotting food and spilled alcohol.

The next thing she noticed was that she was being dragged across the floor by the hood of her jacket, her arms and legs limp and lifeless on either side of her. A groan escaped her throat, her eyes slowly opening to reveal the world again. She quickly realized she wasn't in the forest anymore; she was in a facility of some kind... or at least, that's what Weiss thought it was. Black steel covered the ground, while an arched roof curved above them. They were in a long hall of sorts, the floor beneath her damp and soaking her cold legs.

She blinked the gray fuzz from her vision, lifting her head to look around. Her head felt like it was made of lead, accompanied by a thumping headache that pounded against the back of her eyes. She tried to turn to see who was dragging her away into the unknown, but her body was working against her. She saw the tail of a white coat before her head fell again, dark rings forming around her vision once more. She didn't fight against the lull of sleep, letting her head drop against her chest as she fell under.

Pitch black filled her vision, however Weiss could still hear what was going on. There was a distant dripping noise echoing off the walls, accompanied by a low hum of what Weiss thought was machinery. There were a few voices every now and then, mostly murmurs so quiet that Weiss couldn't hear. One of them spoke multiple times which Weiss quickly assigned to the person dragging her along the ground. It was muffled... the cause, Weiss wasn't sure.

"This is her?"

"Yes."

"T-this is Weiss Schnee."

"Yes."

"Are you daft?! The SDC will kill every Faunus on Remnant if he finds out!-"

“Then we kill her first. Now take her and get her ready before Torchwick gets here, or else you’ll be on display as a rug in the next demonstration!”

The loud shout scared away the darkness, jerking Weiss back to reality again. Her eyes fluttered open in a panic, her vision filling with spots at the sudden rush of adrenaline. She lifted her head, scrambling as she tried to take in her surroundings. They were in a completely different place. There was still a steel floor beneath her, but blue glass lined the walls, and bright white lights lit the displays up from beneath. Black shapes sat against other glass cages, just across from her, watching like phantoms with white masks.

White masks?

Weiss jerked away from the glass wall she had leaned against. Grimm lined the walls, watching her excitedly as she wriggled. The closest one let out an ear piercing scream, alarm sirens starting to blare throughout the halls as the other Grimm began to join in with the cries of the first. An open palm hit the glass hard, the surface rattling from the rough impact. Panic began to swallow Weiss whole. She scrambled desperately to get away from the creature, only for a human palm to actually grab a hold of her neck. Driven purely by fight or flight, she drove her elbow into the side of the person’s knee, freeing her and allowing her to stumble to her feet.

Weiss’ vision swam as she staggered, falling against the railing that lined the glass cages. She took a shaky breath, turning to try and figure out who had been dragging her through wherever she was. Her eyes landed on a masked white figure behind her with what Weiss thought were antlers on their head, through her blurred vision. She took another step back, her knee buckling beneath her own weight.

Move Weiss, she told herself, as she forced herself into a heavy run. Her entire body was weighed down by exhaustion, pulling her towards the ground like a bag of sand. Every step was effort, but slowly began to get lighter as she stumbled through the halls accompanied by heavy, metallic thumps. Weiss shook her head, the muffled noises becoming clear and sharp as whatever drug had been pumped through her system finally wore out.

The walls surrounding her as she ran were all made of double-glazed glass, cages intended for the containment of the Grimm inhabiting them. Weiss didn’t recognise the species, but she blamed it on the drowsiness still lingering in her head. Whatever they were, it didn’t matter. As long as they stayed away from her she’d be okay. The black monsters were pressed against the glass, desperately trying to reach the source of panic and fear that was passing in front of them. Weiss forced herself not to look at them, instead focusing on trying to escape.

Alarms were blaring everywhere, a painful headache clawing at her brain. The halls seemed to stretch on forever, dark and gloomy passage ways that twisted and turned into an endless hallway of Grimm displays. Weiss had no idea where she was going, or even where she was. If she could just find a place to hide-

Her foot caught on a ridge in the floor, a piece of unevenly laid metal flooring that stuck up dangerously. Weiss staggered to the side, her ribs hitting off the protective railing that isolated the path from the creatures in the glass. The sudden change of direction made the girl dizzy, her small figure leaning against the metal, desperately trying to catch her breath. The world swam beneath her, tilting back and forth. Her stomach churned.

“Hey!” A rough voice yelled from behind Weiss, a rough hand reaching forward and grasping her shoulder. Weiss spun around in surprise, just to see a fist collide with her cheek. She fell to the ground with a gasp, her face throbbing painfully.

A knee landed on her shoulder, pinning her to the floor. Weiss grunted, lifting her hands to cover her face as a fist struck her hard, stars dancing across her vision. She let out a cry as another hit her face, then a sharp jab struck her leg and her vision turned hazy again. Her hands dropped against her chest as her strength ebbed away, leaving her listening as the man hissed every derogatory term under the sun. Weiss hissed, trying to hold onto any shred of consciousness she could, but it slipped through her fingers like sand. Her head fell back against the ground, the sounds of blaring alarms and howling Grimm fading from her mind.

Weiss shot awake, startled, her eyes snapping open as she came to for a third time. She wriggled in panic, the jingling and subsequent loud clatter of chains sounding off the confines of... wherever this was now. By inspecting her wrists, Weiss found that she was chained with her hands bound together above her head, the thick, silver chains cutting off circulation as she hung from a rusty hook in the ceiling, the four walls surrounding her a stark white.

“What..?” Weiss muttered to herself, her throat so dry that it made her wince, her old headache returning at the base of her skull. She swung her body around, looking for any signs of where she was. The room was mostly empty. There was a door not too far from it, right in front of her. If Weiss wasn’t being held captive and chained up by her wrists, she would’ve thought she was in a hospital of some sort.

She looked down to her legs, finding that one of her ankles was clamped to the floor as well, probably as another form of ‘precaution’. She tugged at it a few times, finding the cold steel to be wrapped tight against her skin. That’s when she realised that her coat and boots had been taken off, leaving her only in her sleeveless white dress.

Weiss grit her teeth, looking back up to her wrists above her head. Opening her palm, she tried to will her semblance to work. A blue glyph briefly sputtered to life, before dying and fading away once more. Her heart dropped, making a few more attempts, however no symbol formed. It was almost like her semblance wasn't there, which meant her aura was either shattered or close to zero.

Panic settled in her chest as she tried to pull herself free, her leg holding her down and keeping her from swinging. She tried to pull her hands down, growling as the chains pinched the skin on her wrists painfully. She gave up with a breath, letting herself hang free as she regained her strength. She looked at the mirror, watching her own hanging body in the reflection.

"Hello? Can anyone hear me?" she called out, her voice laced with fear and anxiety. She winced at the sound of her own voice, closing her eyes and taking a breath before trying again. "Hello?!"

Nothing but her own voice echoed back at her, leaving the heiress stumped and confused. She glared at her ankle, twisting it around to see if there was a way to slip free, only to give up a few minutes later. She narrowed her eyes, thinking back on the past few hours, or at least she thought it had been hours. She had been in a forest, no, they had been in a forest. Ruby had been with her on a date. Then Torchwick appeared out of nowhere and attacked them. Weiss had passed out at some stage, though she couldn't remember why.

A pit of worry opened in the depths of Weiss' stomach. If she was here in this strange facility, was Ruby here too?

The door in front of her opened with a hiss. Weiss' head shot up quickly, eyes landing on a small girl that lazily moved into the room. She was short, shorter than Weiss, with pink and brown hair, and matching heterochromia coloured eyes. A frilled umbrella was closed over her shoulder, the handle clutched loosely in her hand.

Neo strode into the room with a small smirk, twirling her umbrella over her shoulder as she walked in, her heels clicking beneath every step. The door closed behind her swiftly, blocking any means of escape with a quiet hiss. Weiss watched the door close in despair, before her eyes quickly shifted to Neo. She had only met the mute girl once before, and even then it was a rather brief encounter.

She was Torchwick's partner in crime, always following him around as if she were his shadow. She was infamous for appearing out of nowhere to help criminals escape flawlessly. Any attempts to apprehend her had failed, so nothing specific was known about her. Yang had fought her, and *lost*. That's all Weiss needed to know. Neo was extremely dangerous and devious, something to carefully consider while interacting with her.

“Let me go!” Weiss demanded, watching Neo as she circled around her. Weiss heard the slither of a blade unsheathing from somewhere close, before feeling the flat of the weapon trace lightly along her hip and against her thigh. The heiress jerked away with a grunt, twisting around to face the older girl while the chains jingled above her. Neo twirled a sword on her finger, a teasing smirk on her face. Weiss turned to try and kick the smaller girl, only for her to hop away.

Neo chuckled silently as she bounced on the balls of her feet. She flipped the blade in her hand, catching it by its grip and sliding it back into the handle of the umbrella. Then, her umbrella vanished into tiny glass splinters, disintegrating before the Schnee. She took a step away with a smug look, her hands folding behind her back as she did. Weiss squinted as the girl disappeared in a flash of bright pink and black, followed by the sound of more shattering glass. The heiress blinked away the stinging blurriness from her eyes, before lifting her head to look for her silent kidnapper.

Weiss’ eyes widened in horror as the small woman reappeared, except with a new appearance. Now, she had short, red tipped black hair, an old dusty cape, and dull silver eyes. A sick, knowing smile had found its way onto the mute’s lips as she stood, arms crossed over her chest as she waited.

The heiress froze, her stomach sinking to the pits of hell as ‘Ruby’ came closer to her. ‘Ruby’ smiled, one of those big goofy, toothy grins Ruby only used to win someone over, that Weiss was more than used to seeing. A feeling of rage boiled through Weiss’ veins, her face growing dark.

“Your tricks won’t work against me,” Weiss snarled venomously, her fists balling above her as Neo stepped closer, “I won’t fall for your mind games.”

Neo smirked, a glow appearing in her eye. She stepped closer to Weiss, her face barely an inch away from the Schnee’s. Her hands rested on Weiss’ hips, her thumbs resting carefully in the divots of her bones. An involuntary shiver escaped the heiress at her fake partner’s touch, a foggy memory resurfacing of them by the lake. Weiss clamped her mouth shut, chewing on the back of her lips in fear of making a sound. An intrigued hum came from the fake in front of her, a hand moving away from the Schnee’s hip to trace her stomach. Weiss shut her eyes, holding her head up so she didn’t have to look at her cloned partner.

This was cruel. She could feel Neo’s hands tracing along her body. The hands felt so familiar, so sickly familiar, but so wrong at the same time. She flinched as two fingers grasped at her chin and tilted her head down, the presence of an unfamiliar aura brushing off her skin. She could feel Ruby’s calloused thumbs against her own skin, an effect of her prolonged use of Crescent Rose. A hot breath of air passed Weiss’ ear, a blush crawling up her neck at the sensation.

“Weiss...” Ruby whispered teasingly, her voice soft and sweet, “Weiss...”

“Get *away* from me!” Weiss shouted, driving her head forward to headbutt the fake in front of her. A loud yelp of surprise came from Ruby, followed by the illusion cracking into tiny pieces. Neo staggered away from Weiss, her eyes watering while she held her nose. Weiss found herself smirking while the chains above her settled, watching in satisfaction as Neo wiped crimson from her upper lip. Neo looked down at the back of her hand, Weiss’ brief look of triumph quickly fading from her face. The girl’s eyes gained a glow of malice, a feeling of dread crawling down Weiss’ back.

The Schnee watched as Neo brandished her umbrella again out of thin air, pulling the blade from the handle swiftly. She appeared before Weiss in a heartbeat, flicking the blade up to the Schnee’s neck. Weiss stiffened, gulping nervously, all feeling of satisfaction wiped out instantly. She could feel Neo’s aura flowing through the cold steel at her neck, angry and cold.

Weiss took a delicate breath, holding her head up, “Do it already. I’d rather die than be tortured by scum like you.”

Another wave of fury pulsed through the foreign aura like a fire, the edge of the blade pressing tighter against her skin. Weiss shut her eyes, holding her breath as she waited for the cold steel to make the killing move. She certainly wasn’t ready to leave the world behind, but, if she was going to choose between being tortured before dying, and dying at the hands of a blade quickly, she was going to pick the latter.

“Neo!” A voice behind Neo interrupted. Neo flinched in surprise at the voice, moving the weapon away from Weiss’ neck. Weiss opened her eyes in surprise, finding another person leaning into the open doorway watching in disapproval. Neo straightened her stance immediately as Torchwick glared at her. He took another deep puff from his cigar, his face lighting up in the darkness. “What have I *told* you about damaging the goods?”

Weiss looked back towards Neo as the mute dipped her head in shame, before frantically signing something towards Torchwick. The man tutted, stepping into the room and out of the shadows while the door closed automatically behind him, “I don’t want your excuses. You work for me, understand?”

The girl’s shoulders sagged in defeat, nodding quietly as she stepped back. Roman sighed, looking up from beneath his hat as he moved closer. He leaned against his cane as he examined Weiss, a cock in his brow as he found her furious eyes glaring back at him. He laughed, standing back up straight.

“You’re awfully quiet for a damsel in distress,” He teased, chewing on the butt of his cigar, “And to think I was *excited*. You’re really crushing my dreams here Princess.”

“I am not a damsel in distress,” Weiss growled, careful what words she let slip out of her mouth. She didn’t have the upper hand here yet. She narrowed her eyes, her hands turning into fists above her head, “Let me out of these chains and I’ll show you how much of a *damsel in distress* I am.”

Roman laughed, looking back at Neo in bewilderment, “There’s the spunk I was looking forward to!” He took the cigar from between his teeth, blowing a cloud of toxic smoke into Weiss’ face. The Schnee gagged, coughing the toxic fumes from her lungs while Roman carefully tapped the burnt tobacco from the cigar. He hummed. “However, as much as I’d love to watch Neo beat some manners into you, we can’t afford another breakout.” He looked up from behind his cigar, a smirk forming on his lips, “Fortytwo good men were injured last time, y’know.”

Weiss narrowed her eyes, her voice croaky from the smoke, “...By what?”

“I believe you saw them already, Snow Pea” Roman hummed, flicking his cigar to the ground before crushing it beneath his cane, “The Grimm hybrids in the halls. The ones *you* sent into a frenzy.”

Weiss watched the taller man as he leaned against his cane before her, waiting for the Schnee’s response. Weiss’ azure eyes flicked back to Neo in the corner before returning to Roman, uncertainty stirring within her, “You experimented on Grimm?” Weiss knew Grimm were often used in Dust experiments at the SDC, but why did Roman Torchwick have them? Why did he want them? Neo flashed a smirk as the ginger haired man stopped in front of Weiss again, shaking his head.

“No no no, not Grimm,” Roman turned to face the heiress with a grin, locking eyes with the girl in chains “Humans.”

Weiss frowned, her face scrunching as Torchwick’s words sunk in. Humans? Weiss certainly hadn’t seen any humans, only faunus and the grimm creatures behind the glass. The White Fang didn’t work with humans usually, but it seemed Roman was an exception. Roman leaned on his cane, leaning forward to examine Weiss’ expression with a look of intrigue. Weiss shook her head.

“I.. I don’t understand.”

“Well Snow Pea, it’s really quite simple” Roman started, the door opening behind him as a white fang grunt pushed a silver cart into the room, “Ah, just in time Garry. Leave it there.” Weiss leaned to see what was on the cart. On it was an array of medical equipment; blades, scissors, needles, anything you would need for a surgery. The criminal inspected the cart for a moment while another, bigger black crate was wheeled into the room beside him. He made a pleased noise, before shoo-ing the faunus out of the room with his cane. He came back and picked up one of the syringes from the first tray, which was filled with a strange, thick black liquid.

“See this?” Roman lifted the needle into the air, “This is Grimm essence. Let me tell you, it’s extremely hard to find this. Do you know how many people I killed before I got my hands on a source?” Roman flicked the side of the glass tube holding the substance twice, before squeezing a single drop from the tip. It fell onto his glove, the liquid bubbling and morphing into a tiny moth grimm. Weiss watched on in shocked horror as the tiny moth creature crawled around Roman’s hand, before being crushed beneath his grip.

“Anyway! Introduce this bad boy to someone’s blood and you get a Nuckleave,” he explained, leaving the vial down, “Or, theoretically. I’ve still got to get it to work.”

Weiss felt her body lock up, a cold sweat breaking across her shoulders. She gulped, watching the vial on the tray with fear. She looked over at Neo, who was leaning against the wall with a pleased look on her face. How many of those cages had Weiss passed when she had tried to run away? There had to be a hundred, at least. The halls seemed to go on forever, and some of the cages had more than one Grimm in it. Weiss took a trembling breath, “Those Grimm in the halls...”

“They were all people once. Faunus mostly, but there’s a few humans in there somewhere,” Roman explained, leaning back from the table. He stopped to read Weiss’ features, before a frown set on his face. “Oh, but don’t worry Ice Queen, I won’t turn you into one of them. That’d be a waste.” The red haired man moved towards the second box the grunt had brought in, “Although, I wonder what you would look like. A horse maybe?” Roman shrugged, reaching down to the black crate that had sat untouched until now.

He carefully unbuckled the straps off the side, before opening the lid carefully. He threw off the protective foam covering that laid across the top, before stopping to admire the sight before him. Weiss immediately recognized her family logo sewn into the red fabric inside the lid with silver thread.

It was Dust. *Purified* Dust.

“H-how did you get that?” Weiss asked, ignoring the tremble in her own voice. Roman looked back in surprise, holding one of the crystals in his hand. Unlike weaponized Dust, purified Dust was filtered to the point of just having elemental abilities in it. The crystal itself was almost clear, only having a red tint on the inside, flickering like fire.

Roman threw the red crystal back into the case lazily, before pulling out a blue one instead. An ice Dust shard. It was a beautiful cyan colour that resembled glass, a cold fog coming from the surface as Roman held it, “I don’t know if you noticed Snow Pea, but we’ve been busy robbing every single piece of Dust in Vale; we hit the jackpot a few days ago with a private shipment.” He looked down to the crystal in his hand, “I guess good things really *do* come to those who wait.”

He paced closer to Weiss again, lining the Dust piece up with the heiress’ chest haphazardly. Weiss tried to shrug away from the sheer cold of the shard, her chains ringing as she moved. Roman frowned, tilting his head so he could line up the piece more, “I always wanted to know what would happen if you put purified Dust inside a person.” An evil glint formed in the back of his eyes as he met Weiss’ scared blue orbs, “And there’s no better test subject than the heiress to the Schnee Dust Company herself.”

Panic struck Weiss like lightning as she realized what Roman’s plans were, her stomach sinking. She immediately began to writhe in the chains as Torchwick moved back towards the table. Weiss tried to force her semblance to life, grunting in pain as she tensed her body to try and squeeze something- anything out. Nothing appeared, no familiar blue light that she had practiced summoning for years. She hadn’t even noticed Roman coming back up to her until it was too late, a rough gloved hand grasping her tightly by the throat. Weiss gasped in surprise, gritting her teeth as his fingers squeezed the skin below her jaw.

“Now, be a good princess and stay still for me,” Roman mumbled, brandishing the scissors Weiss had seen on the tray earlier to cut the front of her dress open. Weiss let out a choked cry in terror, swinging her leg hard to try and kick the man in front of her. A hand reached out and caught it mid swing, strong fingers digging into her ankle. Weiss glared down to find Neo frowning up at her, a scroll clutched in her free hand that Weiss was positive hadn’t been there earlier.

Weiss didn’t notice the little red light blinking sporadically on it though.

“LET ME GO!” Weiss screeched as her dress fell from her body freely, landing on the floor along with the scissors Roman had tossed to the side. Weiss’ heart was hammering against her chest, the thumping reverberating in her ears like a drum beat. A shiver rushed down her spine, goosebumps rising along her pale skin, having been left in nothing but her undergarments. An embarrassed flush covered her face as she fought against the chains, glaring poisoned daggers at Roman. He lifted a brow in admiration, his eyes lingering on the heiress’ slim but toned body, before pulling a syringe from his pocket.

“I don’t know how much of this stuff is enough to kill, *buuuut* I’m sure we’ll find out at some point,” he said, pulling Weiss’ head to the side as he lined the needle up to the first vein he could find. He snorted as he pressed the tip to the skin, the pure Dust inside immediately leaving a white, frozen dot in its place. He jammed his thumb against a particularly painful spot on Weiss’ throat, making the girl in his grasp wince. “Hickeys?” He laughed, “What would dear ol’ daddy Schnee say about that?”

Weiss had readied a viscous remark back on her tongue when she felt the frozen needle slide beneath her skin quickly. The heiress whimpered in fright, wriggling her body desperately as she tried to get free. Suddenly, a blistering amalgamation of burning and frozen pain shot through Weiss like a bolt of electricity. She let out a pained yelp, curling in on herself as the cold pain spilled across her shoulder. Deep, ragged breaths racked her chest as she tried to breathe through the pain, but each second it just got worse, like millions of tiny needles pressing deeper and deeper into her skin.

It was like someone had spilled molten metal across her shoulder and neck, bolts of pain shooting up her neck and back down along her arm as the Dust traveled through her bloodstream. Her muscles tensed up, a deep drilling sensation running through her joints. Her eyes were glued shut in pain, loud, desperate wheezes of air coming from her mouth as she desperately tried to overcome the white hot agony flowing through her.

“Well now, that was exciting,” Roman said aloud, before lifting another needle to Weiss’ collar bone, “What if we put some in here?”

Weiss let out another cry of anguish as the monster in front of her injected more of the purified Dust underneath her skin, the pain instantly refreshed across her body. Her vision was filled with white dots as the searing pain in her shoulder flowed down her back, burning its way across her body like a spill of lava. A sob escaped her. What had Weiss done to deserve this? She had tried to be a good person, she had been learning. She had improved so much, she had made *friends*. So why- why were the Gods punishing her so cruelly like this?

Weiss felt tears stream from her eyes as the pain slowly- ever so slowly ebbed away, settling into a frigid frostbite along her chest. She heaved, her hair covering her face as she fought to regain herself. She found herself shivering as the hot pain subsided, replaced by a sub zero sensation along her body, a cold so sharp that it settled across her bones and formed prickly ice crystals of their own beneath her skin. She couldn’t feel any of her chest, the numbness fading away just below her ribs. She coughed, her throat raw from her cries. She didn’t know how long it had been. It was hard to breathe, a weight having settled across her lungs.

A hand grasped her hair, tugging her face up to look up. Angry violet eyes glaring at her through the cheap plastic. The white masked man examined her face, before spitting in it and dropping the girl’s head carelessly. “Schnee scum. Time for you to suffer for all the pain our comrades had to go through.” He pressed his hand against the raw wound

along Weiss' chest, a pained whimper coming from the heiress, "'You watching Jacques Schnee? This is what happens when you mess with the White Fang!'" He tilted his head back to the hanging woman before him, before slamming his fist hard into Weiss' stomach. She answered with a hoarse cry of agony. "You will release the faunus you treat unfairly, or watch your daughter suffer."

"Wh...Why?" Weiss breathed, looking through the shadows of her silvery bangs, "Why are you doing this? What do you get out of it?"

Weiss was quickly silenced by another rough punch to the side of her jaw, a metal ring cutting into skin just above her eyebrow, "I didn't say you could speak, *wretch*." He grabbed her hair again, tugging her body down sharply to look him in the eyes. Weiss looked through glassy vision, finally noticing the tall ears that poked from beneath his hood. "Someone called for you to be knocked down a peg or two, and we gladly accepted."

Weiss' heart lurched at the man's words. Someone had called? He jerked her head up further, her neck screaming in agony at the unwanted motion. Her muscles were almost so tense they were solid, and Weiss could've sworn she heard them pop while she moved. "What..do you.. mean?"

"That's for you to find out," he said as he brandished another cursed syringe. He looked to Neo, who was standing close behind him, her scroll still clutched tight in her fingers, "Besides, as long as we have another Schnee to beat up, who cares? Now we have something to do while we wait for that human to finish those experiments of his."

Weiss looked at the new syringe in distress, unable to move her numb body as the crazed criminal came closer again. He sauntered behind Weiss, looking for the perfect place to continue his sick experiments before pressing the tip of the needle into the crooks of Weiss' spine. Weiss cried, white hot, piercing pain ripping up her spine and across her upper back. The crushing feeling sank deep into her body and across her skin, her chest growing heavier while her breathing grew shallow. She wheezed desperately, trying to get some form of oxygen into her lungs, but her throat was swelling faster than she could breathe.

Her vision wavered, her strength suddenly slipping away from her as she began to run out of air. Thick black fog clouded her vision quickly, her world fading in a stark collection of white and black dots. Her head dropped, laying against her chest as her body grew numb and distant. She didn't fight the embrace of the darkness, her vision completely failing on her. A faint red shadow mocked her from the distance, the particular smell of roses forming in her nose.

Weiss recognised her immediately, a feeling of regret and guilt pooling in her gut. She couldn't give up yet. She couldn't abandon Ruby yet, not after she had promised to be the best partner ever. She needed to hold out. Ruby would come for her, Weiss knew she would. She just needed to have faith.

Ruby would come.

CHAPTER 7 (5.06k) (Posted.)

“Eye of the Storm”

Tick, tick, tick, tick.

The sound of mechanical clock gears turning at the top of Beacon tower filled Professor Ozpin’s office.

His workspace was said to remind students of the concept of time, something the professor himself was always anxious of. He was always afraid of running out of it, of his own time coming to an end.

In a way, his never-ending life resembled a clock. The various hands from each life would move for years, decades even. With each life-cycle, a new beginning. Not unlike pointers revolving for each new hour. However, therein lied a fundamental difference: time had no remorse. If you missed something, time moved on, whether you liked it or not. It had claimed countless victims, himself included.

But now, it seemed time’s lack of remorse had reached its tendrils out to another, leaving Ozpin to deal with the very human feeling of failure and regret.

The news of Weiss Schnee’s disappearance had been... distressing, to say the least. For more reasons than one.

From an outside viewer’s perspective, a student from Beacon had gone missing and supposedly been abducted by the very organisation she had attempted to take down several months prior. Though, it was indeed strange how only Miss Schnee had been kidnapped on those grounds, leaving Miss Rose behind as witness. But the issues at hand did not end there.

Next came the White Fang’s ruthlessness, especially considering Miss Schnee’s heritage... Well, it upped the stakes. Ozpin had yet to receive any ransom requests or threats. There was always a chance that they would never be

delivered to him personally, but rather sent directly to her family. He advised Ironwood to increase security around the cities as a precaution, and not to inform Weiss' sister, Winter Schnee, about the situation as of yet.

Winter Schnee was much unlike her father. She still held some form of loyalty towards her sibling. She had sent a letter of recommendation to Beacon secretly before Weiss had joined, warning Ozpin of her attitude and need to be perfect. It had been partly the reason why Ozpin had not made Weiss leader of team RWBY. He'd witnessed her personality on display during the initiation, but he'd also witnessed how she'd reacted to being around young Ruby Rose.

They'd clicked immediately, once their initial differences were hashed out. Ozpin didn't regret his choice of placing team RWBY together. It had proved to be one of his better choices yet. RWBY had become as prestigious as their top team, CVFY, had been in their younger years. They were already a tight knit family after only two years, which was exactly why Weiss' capture was affecting them so badly. To have family ripped away so suddenly was a painful experience.

Glynda had been helping in the investigation where possible, however, there was not much either of them could do without legality issues forming. The vice Headmaster stood behind him, checking through scroll logs of the students and attempting to find Weiss' student number. If they were lucky, they would be able to find her scroll and any similar scrolls that may have pinged off the CCT at the same exact time, in the same area. They could use that to help pin down exactly who the assailants were. So that they could, at the very least, find some suspects.

He peered over as the elevator bell leading to his office rang with a 'ding'. He'd been updating the remains of team RWBY the best he could. He knew their leader had been hospitalised after the attack too. She was yet to wake up which added more to the headmaster's burden. She was a key witness in all of this, and without her view on the situation, it would be unwise to plan. The doors to the elevator opened.

"I hope you are well, children" Ozpin began, hands tied together just under his chin while he watched the two remaining members of RWBY walk from the elevator towards his desk. Yang led the charge while Blake trailed close behind, both girls looking just as tired and exhausted as each other. They had murky, dark bags under their eyes, trudging about sluggishly. Ozpin narrowed his own exhausted eyes, noting how Yang's hair had a light, fiery glow.

"It's been four days, Ozpin," Yang grumbled loudly as they finally reached the glass desk. Yang hadn't slept much during those three days and when she managed, her sleep was wrecked by nightmares of finding her sister dead in the forest. To say she was irritable was a dangerous understatement. "Do you have any leads at all, or are we going to have to wait until we find Weiss' body strung up on a tree somewhere!?"

Blake pressed a hand onto Yang's shoulder, feeling how hot the girl's aura was. Yang's muscles relaxed slightly at the feeling of Blake's soft touch, but her gaze remained hard on Ozpin who wore a judging one. Glynda frowned in annoyance at the girl's tone but did not comment, too preoccupied with searching for Weiss' credentials to raise her voice.

"Patience is important, Miss Xiao Long," Ozpin hummed, ignoring Yang's threatening tone. The blonde huffed in frustration, her hair brightening up another notch. She muttered something harsh under her breath, low enough for Ozpin not to hear. He decided to ignore that too. "How is Miss Rose? Is her recovery going well?"

"She's still asleep, unfortunately." Blake answered quickly, letting her hand fall from Yang's shoulder as she spoke while stepping forward. "The nurses underestimated the dosage of Midazolam that she was exposed to. She's fully healed from her wounds, but she's due to wake up anytime now."

"I am sorry to hear that." Ozpin lifted his mug to his mouth to take a sip of coffee, before letting it fall to the table again, "I assure you she is in the hands of some of the best healers I know, but I'm afraid they can do little for someone who is asleep."

"Thank you, professor. We appreciate everything you've done so far." Blake bowed her head respectfully.

Yang's arms fell to her sides with a sigh, looking between Blake and Glynda as her temper began to build. She'd been dragged away from her sister for this, and so far it had been a colossal waste of her time. Ruby could be waking up right now, lost, confused and in pain. Yang was supposed to be there for her when she woke up, but *Ozpin* was dragging whatever this was supposed to be, out.

"Can we not beat around the bush? Do you have updates for us or *not*?" She growled. This time Blake didn't raise her hand to calm her, perhaps starting to grow impatient herself. If she was, she was masking it well. Glynda's eyes narrowed for a second time, looking back at Ozpin as he stood from his chair and turned his back to the girls.

"I do."

Yang bristled in anticipation, "You do? Then tell us, old man!"

"Yang," Blake warned, her voice low. Yang growled, foldinging her arms. Ozpin was *really* starting to get on her already fraying nerves.

“Luckily for us, team CFVY was in Vale before the storm hit,” Ozpin looked beyond the school, to the angry black clouds and lightning across the ocean that held them hostage on the school grounds, “Naturally, once they heard of your predicament, they offered to help.” The man looked back to his own reflection, before Blake noticed him watching them through the glass.

“We sent them to follow the tracks you found in the forest. They lead to an abandoned Dust refinery a few hours outside the city,” Ozpin continued, turning back to face team RWBY before him, “Which strangely had brand new Dust delivery trucks parked outside.”

“So?” Yang asked, looking at Glynda, who had finally moved from her spot by a supportive pillar nearby. Blake, unlike her partner, had picked up on the headmaster’s hints. She looked between the two teachers.

“Why would there be new deliveries at an abandoned Dust refinery?” She said out loud. Ozpin smiled as he witnessed Yang catch on to her partner’s train of thought. The Dust refineries in Vale hadn’t been used since the war. Buildings were scattered everywhere as relics of the past, decaying and rotting, a remnant of the great war. Many had been demolished, but some still survived. This was one such building.

“We believe it’s a White Fang hideout.” Glynda responded, pressing her scroll to the desk. A photo appeared in the form of a hologram, taken from what looked like a tree. It depicted an abandoned building that looked dangerously old, that reached to be several stories tall. The roof looked as if it had caved in years ago, multiple windows were smashed, but new SDC trucks were parked outside in a neat line. The vehicles blocked the main entrance or where the entrance should’ve been.

“This Dust refinery in particular is quite large on the inside. The perfect place to hide anything the White Fang would ever need to; Dust, guns, prototype robots...” Glynda finished, before peering over her glasses to Yang and Blake with a sharp look. “...or for holding hostages.”

“Have CVFY gone in yet?” Yang asked, her previous temper having been replaced with desperate curiosity. Headmaster Ozpin shook his head. “Why not?!”

“We already have one injured and one missing from the second most prestigious team in Beacon, Miss Xiao Long. Should Team CFVY be compromised, or turned into even more hostages, their safety, the school’s and I, would be in serious trouble,” He explained, his own eyes fixated on the photograph. “We are also unsure if Miss Schnee is even in there. She could have been moved to other premises. The rain may have washed away fresh tracks before we could find them. But most importantly, we don’t want the White Fang to know we’re onto them.”

“That’s not all-” Glynda started, only for a woosh of sweetly scented air to fill the room.

“She’s not here....”

Blake and Yang whipped around at the sound of a soft, high pitched voice, finding the tired form of Ruby Rose to be standing in the door of the elevator. Several rose petals had settled around her feet, a sign she had used her semblance to reach the elevator, likely to escape the infirmary. Her hair was ruffled and sticking out everywhere, but her eyes were bright and angry.

She wore a loose fitting tank top and some fluffy trousers belonging to her pajamas. She looked like she had just woken up and immediately raced to the office, which in hindsight, was probably what happened. Blake could easily imagine the exasperated nurses being left behind buried in rose petals as a red tornado rushed out of the building.

“Ruby!” Yang exclaimed in surprise, rushing to stand by her sister. She skid to a halt in front of the small brunette, crouching down to help her younger sibling stand. Ruby’s aura was practically non-existent. She must’ve used what little she’d regenerated to fuel her semblance to get here, Yang noticed with a disapproving frown. “What are you doing here? You should be resting!”

“Where’s Weiss?” Ruby growled, shoving past her sister and towards Ozpin’s desk. Blake blinked as their leader stopped in front of her, surprised to see the girl walking around so suddenly. An hour ago she had still been asleep and attached to drips and monitors. Blake’s eyes moved to Ruby’s elbow, where smeared blood covered her skin. She was massaging the joint with her thumb. She must’ve ripped the needle free in her panic.

“Miss Rose, it is good to see you awake,” Ozpin hummed, surprised to be facing the leader of team RWBY already. “I must admit, I wasn’t expecting you to join us.” He crossed glances with Glynda. “Do you remember who attacked you?”

“The White Fang. They followed us from the docks,” Ruby answered immediately, purposely leaving out the fact that they’d visited a black market. She took a deep breath, clearing her head of the heavy feeling that had set in since she’d woken up. “They jumped us while we were in the forest. Roman Torchwick led them.”

Yang jogged back from the elevator to stand beside her sister, grabbing the smaller girl’s shoulder tightly and spinning her to meet Yang’s horrified features, “*Torchwick?* As in, Dust robber, giant-robot, tried-to-kill-you-three-times Torchwick? You fought him alone?!”

“We didn’t really get a chance to fight,” Ruby explained, rubbing the back of her neck where she’d been darted, “We were knocked out before we even knew what was happening.”

“So, now Roman Torchwick is also involved in this predicament,” Ozpin hummed, his gaze hardening as he thought, “This situation is getting worse and worse by the minute-”

Suddenly, Glynda let out a low gasp, her eyes widening behind glasses as she watched something on her scroll. The headmaster looked across to her as she grew pale, “Glynda? Is something the matter?”

“Professor, I-I think you need to see this,” Glynda mumbled, connecting her scroll wirelessly to the glass desk’s computer.

“A video? Where did you get this?” Professor Ozpin asked.

Ruby turned back to meet the gaze of their headmasters as Ozpin pressed a key on his keyboard, the photo of the half-ruined building quickly replaced by a blurry shot of colours. A play icon sat in the middle of the screen.

“The CCT just broadcasted a video, from an unknown sender,” the Huntress explained, her voice laced with discomfort. “It’s addressed to Jacques Schnee.”

“That certainly isn’t good news,” Ozpin hummed, looking through the timeframe data of the video. Just as Glynda had said, an unknown video had just appeared at the top of the CCT News bulletin, with the title “Dear Mr Schnee” across the top of it. The thumbnail was of a blurry white screen that none of them could exactly make out.

“Brace yourselves,” Glynda warned, “This most likely will not be pleasant.”

Ruby took a breath through her teeth as the video began to play, voices and sounds slowly coming to life.

“LET ME GO!”

Ruby's blood ran cold.

Situated in the middle of the screen was none other than Weiss, the dress she'd been wearing to their date dirtied and fallen to the floor. Her arms reached above her head, chained tightly together while she hung from the ceiling. Dark, ugly bruises rose from her pale wrists and up her arms, as well as around her neck.

Weiss looked *terrified*.

"I don't know how much of this stuff is enough to kill, buuuut I'm sure we'll find out at some point."

Ruby's eyes fixated on the white coated figure that moved back towards Weiss, recognising the orange hair of Roman sticking out from under his bowler cap. She hissed, seething anger forming in her heart. She balled up her fists as he ran his fingers along Weiss' bruised neck, before muttering something too quiet for Ruby to make out into the girl's ear. Weiss opened her mouth to say something, but whatever words were supposed to come out was quickly replaced with a shrill whimper.

Ruby shut her eyes with a gasp as Weiss began to scream. The video kept going, but Ruby forced herself not to pay attention. Tears flowed freely from her eyes, falling from her chin with thick drops and soaking into her chest. This was her fault, *this was all her fault*. She should've known better than to trust a faunus in a Black Market-

"..Ru...by..."

Ruby's head shot up with a panicked breath, her chest too tight to breathe. Torchwick was gone now, instead replaced by a stronger, meaner White Fang grunt holding brass knuckles between his fingers. Tall ears reached up out of his hood, while one of those Grimm masks covered his eyes and hid his identity. Crimson stained his jacket in splotches.

Behind him, Weiss was bloody and bruised, and so pale. She had strange white spots dotting her shoulders that she couldn't make out, they were so faint that Ruby didn't even know if they were really there to begin with. Ruby could've sworn Weiss was staring through the screen at *her*, her exhausted icy eyes staring straight to the pits of Ruby's soul, pained and hurting and desperate for help. Ruby felt fresh tears fall from her eyes, her trembling hands reaching up to cover her mortified face as she watched on. She felt so helpless. Ruby was supposed to be a huntress. She was supposed to help people! What good was she if she couldn't even save her best friend...

The faunus sneered and turned back to the hanging young woman, whose eyes shifted from the camera to face him again. She opened her mouth, as if she was going to say something, but fell silent as brass knuckles met her bruised ribs. Ruby held back a cry to stop, a sharp metallic taste filling her mouth as she bit her tongue. Weiss didn't even make a noise as she was struck again, another wheezy cough being interrupted as thick blood flew from her lips and onto the White Fang's mask.

"We want Faunus freedom and equality by the end of the week, Schnee, or your daughter is dead!"

And then, the video ended.

The room was silent as everyone recovered from what they had seen. Glynda turned the video off just as another roar of thunder erupted over the school.

Ruby's shoulders tensed as she struggled to catch her breath, turning away from the desk to try and get a hold of herself. All it took was Yang's touch to prompt Ruby to cling to her elder sister's chest desperately and sob into it as her emotional walls shattered beneath the force of what she'd just witnessed. Her legs slipped from beneath her, Yang's arms holding onto her tightly as she settled on the floor beside her. Her chest muffled the cries that were coming from her baby sister as she wept. She'd seen her like this once before, and once was certainly enough for her.

"I-" Even Ozpin himself appeared horrified from what he'd just witnessed, quickly swiping off the video and holding Glynda's scroll out for her to take, "This is now a matter outside of our hands."

"What?!" Yang cried, her eyes lighting up a violent red, "You're not suggesting we just leave Weiss to die, are you?!" *So help her if he was...*

"Of course not, Miss Xiao Long, but you must understand, it would be irresponsible of me to send children on such a delicate rescue mission." Ozpin said back harshly, "I understand she is your teammate, but this is outside of your abilities." He sighed heavily, wringing his hands together as he stood from his desk. "Glynda, please track where that footage came from."

"The data is almost identical to the Dust refinery we were suspicious of earlier," She responded quickly, "Shall I send an email to Mr. Schnee?"

“Wait wait wait!” Yang yelled, leaving Ruby to Blake as she stood back to her feet “If the White Fang knows the army is coming they’ll kill Weiss on the spot! This is ridiculous! You have to send us in! We’ve dealt with these guys before!”

“Absolutely not,” retorted Glynda. Yang’s hair sparked, a sign that she was about to combust any moment. Blake watched silently as Yang got hotter, gently stroking the back of Ruby’s head and quietly purring in attempts to calm her down. She was trembling like a leaf.

“*But-*!” Yang went to argue, yet Glynda had already pulled out her crop in warning.

“This is a non-negotiable matter, Miss Xiao Long,” Glynda warned, her eyes flickering to Ruby’s crumbled form on the floor, “Your teammates are distraught, and your leader has only woken up from a coma in hospital. Do you *truly* believe you could take on an entire terrorist organisation in such a state?”

Yang’s resolve faltered, “N-no, but-”

“Then it’s settled,” she concluded, putting her crop away as Yang’s flames died out again. “Neither you, nor any other student, will be joining in on this endeavor.”

Ozpin sighed, looking back out to the storm that raged outside, “Just to be sure, all student travel from Beacon will be banned until Miss Schnee is recovered.”

“Professor, that’s unfair!” Blake finally spoke up, her voice threaded in betrayal, “What about the Vytal Festival? Students are still arriving from the other continents.”

“If the White Fang are kidnapping students of skill, then it would be foolish to allow so many to gather in one area.” Ozpin hummed, “They shall wait until this situation has been defused.”

Blake’s eyes grew dull in worry, looking back at her own partner, who was still on edge due to the current state of things. Ruby curled up closer into Blake’s chest, seeking some kind of warmth. Blake pressed closer to the girl, sharing some of her aura to reassure her. Yang bit her lip. “When will you two be leaving?”

“As soon as we can. Now, please return to your dormitories.”

Yang’s shoulders sagged with a tired sigh.

“Yes Professor.” She hummed, crouching down beside her sister and asking Ruby something about moving. The quiet girl nodded after a long moment, being lifted into Yang’s arms with the help of Blake, still curled up against her chest. Blake looked back at Ozpin and Glynda with narrowed eyes as the elevator opened. Soon, all three girls had disappeared behind metal doors, heading back towards the dormitories to rest and recollect themselves.

Glynda let out a sigh, rubbing the bridge of her nose where her glasses usually sat, “What a disaster.”

“Agreed,” He responded calmly, reaching for his mug again “The involvement of Roman Torchwick is deeply concerning.”

“What would a petty thief like Roman want with a Schnee? If it was ransom, surely a notification would’ve gone out by now,” Glynda continued, her own gaze watching the rolling clouds.

“It wasn’t a ransom kidnapping.” Ozpin hummed from inside his cup of coffee, “A shipment of highly secretive Dust was hijacked last week and the White Fang have been quiet for some time. I don’t believe those are coincidences, nor do I think Roman is in charge.”

Glynda raised a brow, “What are you insinuating?”

“I’m not sure yet,” Ozpin responded, his eyes thin and calculating, “But if Miss Schnee is found *alive*, I have my doubts that she will ever be the same person again.” He glanced down to the courtyard, where Yang and Blake were jogging through the muddy rain like a torch in the night.

“Do you think they’ll listen to your orders?” Glynda asked, watching them as well.

“I don’t expect them too,” Ozpin huffed, taking another sip of his, now cold, coffee, “In fact, I expect them to leave as soon as they can.”

“Are you testing their abilities?”

“I’m testing their bond.” he corrected, “Tell Ironwood to send Winter to the Dust refinery tomorrow, along with a first-aid unit.”

“Sir?” Glynda asked quizzically as the headmaster turned back to his desk. “No soldiers?”

“We have two of the most prestigious huntsmen groups in Beacon on the scene already,” Ozpin said with a smile, “Why would we need soldiers?”

-

The RWBY dorm was silent.

The air in the room was heavy and thick with emotions. Ruby had fallen to Weiss’ bed and not moved or spoken to either of her remaining team members. Blake had given her Weiss’ hair piece that she’d found in the forest, careful with the fragile glass ornament. She’d kept it safe ever since recovering it, but Blake felt it belonged more to Ruby than to her. She had no right to hold onto it, and it felt wrong for an ex-White Fang member to keep it. Ruby had taken it in shock, tears immediately springing to her eyes at the sight of it.

Ruby was hunched over on Weiss’ bed, holding the heiress’ shattered glass hairpiece between her fingers. She carefully ran the pad of her thumb across the cracked ridges, her throat tightening as her emotions slowly threatened to crush her alive. Weiss always wore it in her hair, and Ruby had once thought it was made of ice. It felt sick to hold it in her hands.

“Can you believe Ozpin?!” Yang growled, her fists tightening on her lap, “I mean, he has some nerve telling us not to go after Weiss after *what we just saw!*”

“He’s just trying to protect us, Yang.” Blake said, but she didn’t believe her own words. She was just as annoyed as Yang was with the situation, but getting verbally angry would only put a wedge between them and their headmasters.

“Protect us my ass!” The brute continued, “We’re not going to listen to him are we?!”

“No,” Blake said, “But he was right about one thing, right now we’re not in the right place to go find Weiss ourselves. It’d be suicide.”

“What about team CFVY?” Yang suggested, “They’re over in Vale, why don’t we just message them?”

Blake pondered the idea for a moment, before nodding, “It’s worth a shot, at least.”

“This is my fault,” Ruby murmured, her voice breaking while she interrupted the other two in the room, “this is all my fault-”

Yang’s eyes widened, quickly jumping from Blake’s bed to sit beside her distressed younger sister. She wrapped an arm around Ruby’s trembling shoulders, tightly squeezing her against her own body. She looked down, trying to catch Ruby’s eye, “No- No Rubes, none of this is your fault.”

“But it is!” Ruby cried, pulling away from her sister to stand between the beds. Her hands were wrapped around the glass hair piece so tight that her fingers were going white, warm blood trickling out of her palm as the sharp edges cut into her grip. Yang’s arm hovered in the air for a moment longer, before letting it drop to her side again.

“It’s all my fault!-” Ruby choked on the lump in her throat, tears filling her eyes. She looked back down and loosened her grip on the glass slightly to look at the blood in her hands. She sobbed, falling to her knees as her breath got caught in her throat. “It’s my fault she’s gone...”

Blake rose from her bed, carefully moving and kneeling in front of her best friend. Yang didn’t move, knowing Blake was the softer of the two. The Faunus carefully grabbed Ruby’s chin, lifting her teary eyes to meet Blake’s own. Ruby watched them for a second, before breaking and falling against Blake’s shoulder and letting out a pitched cry.

“We’ll get her back, Ruby,” Blake purred, gently stroking the back of Ruby’s head as she had done earlier. She could feel a growing, damp patch on her shoulder as Ruby’s shoulders shook. Blake rested her hand gently on the crown of Ruby’s head, her cat ears flattening against her head. “But we need to know how this happened before we do. Others could be in danger.”

Ruby sniffed, lying against Blake's shoulder a little while longer. Part of Blake wondered if the rose had even heard her at all, but the girl pulled her head away slowly. She wiped her eyes with her wrist, folding her legs as she sat back. Yang joined them on the ground.

"We.. We went to the black market-"

"*What?!-*" Yang blurted, before Blake's hand was quickly planted over her mouth. Blake glared at her, before nodding for Ruby to continue.

Ruby looked down to the ground in shame, "I- I've been going for a little while. I thought it would be safe. We were only there for ten minutes." She sighed, watching as her aura knit the cuts on her hands closed. "Weiss didn't want to go in, and I should've listened to her. She knows more about these things than I do." She sighed again.

"You went in?" Blake prompted quietly. Ruby nodded.

"We went to a baker I'd been visiting. Her name's Amber-" Ruby's features turned into an angry scowl "She's the one who sold us out."

"Was she a Faunus?" the feline girl asked. Ruby nodded.

"She was a fox. I think. Everyone there was a Faunus of some sort."

"Then it was probably a White Fang trading center." Blake muttered, finally dropping her hand from Yang's mouth. The blonde immediately piped up again.

"What were you thinking going to a black market full of Faunus?!" She yelled, "Of course something bad was going to happen! We *literally* stopped their master plan a few months ago! And once before that, too!"

Ruby flinched, "I know..."

"I could've lost you Ruby! You need to be more careful!"

"I know" Ruby repeated with a wobbly sigh, hugging her knees to her chest. She knew she had messed up, and she had realised that the second Roman had told them about Amber. She didn't need her sister to remind her about that. Both Weiss missing without a trace left in behind other than for the gruesome video, and Ruby's aching body were enough of a nasty reminder. She took a heavy breath, her throat tightening as fresh tears gathered in her eyes.

"What happened after that? Did you two notice anything suspicious in the market?" Blake asked, maybe a little too eagerly. Ruby shifted uncomfortably.

"Weiss acted off at one point, bu- but we left quickly after that."

"You didn't see a red bull Faunus anywhere?" Blake pushed again. Ruby frowned.

"I didn't, maybe Weiss did? There was no b-bull Faunus when we were attacked either."

"Good," Blake sighed, her ears drooping. Yang gave her a suspicious look, studying her partner. Blake's anxiety had risen once she'd mentioned that bull Faunus. A part of Yang wondered if it was something from Blake's time in the cult. She'd mentioned having a partner once or twice, maybe that was it? Yang wasn't sure, but she wasn't going to press for information right now.

She let it go, turning her attention back to Ruby again, whose eyes were back on the glass hair piece that belonged to her partner.

"What if we never get her back?" Ruby mumbled, her eyes growing cloudy again, "What if she's *murdered* because she's a S-Schnee?"

"We'll get her back, Rubes" Yang said.

Ruby's vision didn't lift, instead she focused on trying to realign the glass pieces together. The shattered edges fit together loosely, some of the tiny fragments having gotten lost when it shattered. Ruby hated holding it. It felt so wrong to hold something so precious to the Ice Queen, but it was the only thing that brought some relief to her strained mind.

“Yang’s right,” Blake said, reaching out and pressing a warm hand to Ruby’s shoulder. “Weiss won’t go down without a fight.”

“Yeah! This is Weiss we’re talking about!” Yang joined, shuffling closer so that she could wrap an arm around Ruby’s neck, “Remember the time she froze me to the ground for using her hairbrush? You all left me there while you went for breakfast!”

Ruby giggled slightly, “She called you a yeti.”

"A yeti, huh?" Yang made a growling noise, before pulling Ruby into a headlock and rubbing her knuckles against Ruby's scalp. The smaller girl let out a cry in surprise, trying to wedge her head out from the death grip. "In my defense, she shouldn't have left it unattended."

"You stole it off her bed," Blake hummed, a warm smile on her face. Yang waved her off, a grin settling across her lips.

"Psh, it was in my line of sight." She defended, smiling as Ruby’s quiet whines of protest rippled between the bee duo. Yang finally let go of their leader, watching as Ruby sprung back with a gasp and rolled onto her back. She held the top of her head uncomfortably.

"Bully!" Ruby cried in anguish.

Yang stuck out her tongue.

“I’ll get you for that!” Ruby giggled, slowly settling down again. She sighed as the rush left her, a forced smile resting on her. Maybe if she let Yang and Blake believe she was okay, they’d leave her be. Her mind was still clouded and her throat still tight. “Thanks for trying to make me feel better.”

Although Yang’s attempts had managed to lift her spirits a little, the tightness that lingered in Ruby’s chest was almost suffocating, like someone had left a sack full of sand on her chest. Her lower lip still quivered despite her best attempts at stopping it, but luckily for her it seemed Yang had overlooked it or ignored it.

"You're totally welcome! I can't have a depressed younger sister. That'd ruin my vibe." Yang teased with a wink, "Point is, Weiss is a feisty fighter. Maybe she's already escaped and she's on her way home!" Yang suggested. Ruby hummed unsurely. She didn't know if she believed that, but she appreciated the optimism.

"You're right," Ruby patted either side of her cheeks, swallowing the bulge in her throat with a hard gulp. "We have to have... hope."

"There's our leader," Blake said with a smile. Ruby laughed half-heartedly, before a loud rumble echoed throughout the room. It got quiet for a minute as the three girls registered where the noise had come from. Ruby's hand landed on her stomach. Yang's eyes widened as Ruby's face turned as red as her cape.

"Was that your stomach?!" She laughed, "It was almost as loud as the thunder outside!"

Ruby closed her eyes in embarrassment, "I- uh, haven't eaten since I woke up."

"Let's go get some food then," Blake suggested over Yang's chuckles, "We'll need to have our strength up for when we're called on for the mission. We can't fight Torchwick on an empty stomach."

Yang rolled onto her back, placing her hands behind her head and hopping to her feet. She placed a hand on her own stomach, "Sounds great! I'm starving!"

"You're always hungry," Ruby remarked, shuffling to her own feet, the glass ornament still clutched in her hand. Yang grabbed Ruby around the neck again, making the smaller girl squeal in surrender.

"You're one to talk!"

Ruby used her semblance to escape Yang's hold, moving to stand by Weiss' bed again. Myrtenaster was laid across the center, alongside a replacement scroll that had yet to be registered. Carefully, Ruby laid the two pieces of the hairpin alongside the other belongings of her partner, making sure either half was lined up as best they could be. A pang of pain struck her heart at the sight, her silver orbs growing glassy again.

"I'll find you, Weiss," Ruby muttered softly, looking at the photo of the four of them in first year, which rested between the beds. Ruby took a breath, looking to the storm outside as tears welled in her eyes again. "Even if it kills me."

-

"How's our guest doing, Perry?"

The deer scientist looked up in surprise as Roman Torchwick leaned over him, a cigar in his mouth as he examined the screen in front of him. Perry, who's real name was Jackson Winchester, looked down to his papers quickly, scanning through the results. He pulled up an MRI scan on the screen.

"She- uhm- Her body has adapted well to the implants," He began nervously, a tremble in his voice as he pointed to the chest on the screen, where it showed chunks of unnatural multicoloured substance sitting below the skin, "The implants have attached themselves to main components of the body, except the lungs. Her heart rate has slowed as well."

"So she's going to live?" Roman asked impatiently, picking up a page that recorded vitals from the past few days. The numbers fluctuated a bit at the start, but it had remained consistent the last day and a half. She had been confirmed stable that morning, which was when most of the testing had begun. Roman had to admit, he was impressed. For such a scrawny kid, she sure was determined not to die.

"Y-yes sir, but you can't do anymore testing for another few days while we wait and see how the Dust reacts to her heart. Her heart rate slowed by only a small bit of Dust entering it" The scientist continued. Roman hummed, leaning on his cane.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning we're not sure if she's just waiting to die, or if her body has really accepted the Dust. The dip in her heart rate made her body temperature drop, which is deeply concerning," He pointed to the paper in Roman's hands, "It's unnatural."

“Well, so is pure Dust,” Roman remarked back, pointing to the screen again, which was now showing surveillance of the room where Weiss still hung. Her wrists had turned a sick purple, which were visible even on camera. A result of her struggling.

“Keep testing. I want any and all information that I can sell,” Roman ordered, moving away from Perry as he left the lab, “And start immediately.” Metal doors hissed open in front of him, leading to a hall and a single door built into the wall. He approached the door, lighting a cigar as he waited for it to scan him and approve of his presence.

He didn’t approve of all this technology, or all this high tech testing. He much preferred to just tape someone to a chair and beat them with a crowbar, but that was ‘unprofessional’ in the White Fang, and that a Schnee had to be treated carefully while they waited for the right time to reveal their abomination.

The end goal was to brainwash this Schnee enough to turn her to the White Fang. A Schnee who sided with a criminal organisation would be valuable, undoubtedly so, but a *monster* with the Schnee name? That would be perfect. If her implants went off without a hitch, she’d become the perfect monster to release on human kind. A killing machine... They just needed a semblance strong enough to control her mind, which they were in the process of receiving. Someone in Vacuo, but Roman hadn’t been told much.

Of course, that was all wishful thinking. The faunus always aimed too high, Roman had noticed. They were always aiming for the stars, while they waited too long and missed the smaller fish. Just because they had a Schnee didn’t mean they were out of hot waters just yet. That Schnee had a team of very annoying huntresses, an older sister in the army, and a very powerful, very angry father. Roman hadn’t agreed to join this suicidal agenda at first, but hey, money was money, and there was a lot of money.

Finally, the heavy metal door opened with a hiss. He grinned, biting onto the butt of his cigar as he waltzed into the room, “Good morning, Princess! I saw you’re alive and kicking, how surprising! You’re full of little surprises like that, aren’t you?”

Weiss barely lifted her head, a scared eye watching Roman through pale eyelashes. She didn’t talk, not like she could. Roman was pretty sure she’d screamed her voice out during their first few sessions.

Roman grimaced at the blood that stained the floor, before lifting Weiss’ head to examine the points where he’d pressed the needles under skin. The skin had closed, but disgusting black bruises surrounded her neck. Maybe that was why she couldn’t speak.

“Fear not, Schnee. You’ll be working for us soon, then you won’t remember anything,” Roman whispered. Weiss knit her brows together, taking a pained, deep breath.

“I’ll...never work... for you,” she wheezed out, needing to take a breath for each word. Roman laughed as more scientists joined him. He turned his back on her, lifting a hand to wave at the Schnee as he left.

“We’ll see about that! Goodnight, Schnee!”

Weiss watched in distress as Roman left, before her head fell again. She felt more needles slip beneath her skin as they scientists continued their forsaken tests, her eyes closing as she let the faunus do as they liked. Her pool of hope was drying up, but she hadn’t given up just yet. She just had to keep holding onto the strands of what she had left.

CHAPTER 8 (4.8k) (Posted.)

“Save Our Souls”

Ruby stared at herself in the mirror, her hands fiddling with the cross shaped clasps tied on either side of her combat uniform. Her fingers were trembling as she stood, a cold sweat already breaking out across her body as she prepared for the mission. Her combat outfit had been cleaned while she'd been out, all of their clothes had. Weiss' as well, even though she wasn't there...

She took a sharp breath, shaking away the dark thoughts that tormented her. “She'll be okay. You're going to find her and bring her home.” Ruby temporarily held her breath as she met her own reflection, her usually silver coloured eyes a dead mercury, the eye white in both red and puffy. She could see the stress-borne bags that had formed under them too: deep, gouged curves that stripped any of her childish youth away from her. She looked exhausted, and, if she had to be honest, she was.

Even now, the memories of nightmares she was trying to repress, were fighting their way back to the forefront of her mind.

Ruby stretched her arms up above her head as she walked through a forest, basking in the sunlight that brushed off her bare skin. Actually, now that she thought about it, she wasn't wearing her combat outfit at all, contrary to previous belief. Instead, she was dressed in her special outfit: her favourite cotton grey long-sleeve jumper and matching button up corset, complemented by a vibrant red skirt and black tights.

Ruby blinked at herself in shock. The clothes she had on were reserved for very special occasions, stored safely in the back of her dresser. Yang had helped her pick them before coming to Beacon, but why was she wearing them?

“Are you coming, Dolt?”

Ruby laughed nervously, looking up to meet the gaze of her crystal eyed partner with a grin.

“Yeah, wait for me!”

Ruby jogged up to where Weiss had been standing, or at least, to where Ruby thought she was until a moment ago. She looked around, finding the lakeside to be completely barren of life. Fear clawed at her heart as she swiveled, trying to find her white haired partner. "Weiss? Where'd you go?"

Ruby turned around once more to try and find Weiss, only for her to fall limply into her arms like a dead weight. Ruby grunted in surprise, shifting her footing so she could hold Weiss' limp body. Panic struck her like lightning. "W-Weiss? H-hey- Weiss?!"

Something kicked her footing out from under her, sending her butt-first to the floor with a hard thump.

Ruby winced in pain, her back arching as waves of it reverberated up through her spine and tears stung at the corners of her eyes. As she tried to recollect herself, she looked down to check if Weiss was okay- only for her to have miraculously disappeared from Ruby's arms, replaced by a shattered glass hair piece. Ruby reached for it, jerking back with a yelp as it cut into her palm.

Clutching her hand as it bled, Ruby got back on her feet, suddenly finding herself in a blurry world of white. Everything in her vision was of the stark colour, blinding her momentarily as her eyes readjusted to the sudden change in brightness. She squinted, her sight locking onto a figure watching her not too far away. They were wearing all white too- Ruby squinted harder- Actually, they weren't wearing anything at all except for their undergarments.

A hot blush crawled up her neck as she realised she was staring at Weiss' unclothed body, her eyes falling to her feet the instant she noticed. Blood was dripping from her hand to the ground, landing in thick droplets of crimson and painting the floor a dark shade of red.

A foot stood into the now large puddle, rippling Ruby's reflection back at her. Startled, Ruby took a step back, now face to face with the person she'd been searching for.

"W-Weiss...?"

"You did this to me." she snarled back, blood spilling from her lips like syrup every time she opened her mouth. Ruby went to speak, but Weiss cut over her again. "Look at what you did to me. Look. At. Me."

Ruby did as she was told, shamefully glancing down to Weiss' body. She was so thin that Ruby could see and count every single bone beneath her almost translucent skin, including how her ribs were misplaced and broken. She could follow a vein from Weiss' neck down to her chest and to the tips of her fingers almost perfectly, like someone

had taken a pen and traced along every single line they could find on Weiss' body. Stark red wounds and black bruises covered her entire figure, while painful looking burns scarred her chest and shoulders, even up her neck in specks.

"I- I'm sorry- I was too slow-" Ruby sobbed, tears freely falling from her eyes as she was forced to take in the sight of Weiss' marred body.

*"They killed me." Weiss growled, "They murdered me, and you just **watched**."*

"N-no!" Ruby sobbed. Weiss stepped closer, the smell of blood and rotting flesh hitting Ruby's sense of smell like a freight train, causing her throat to tighten. "I-I tried-" She took a shaky breath, trying to meet Weiss' gaze but failing. "I tried to save- you-"

"I died, Ruby, and it's all your fault."

"It's not! Y-you- they should've taken me-"

"Yes, they should have." Weiss croaked, blood so dark it resembled black spilling from every orifice on Weiss' face, from her eyes, to her nose, mouth and ears. Even her scar had reopened. "You left me to die, at the hands of the White Fang." Weiss stepped closer, her nose practically touching Ruby's.

Ruby held her breath, shutting her eyes so she didn't have to look at her. A hand came up to hold her jaw, before moving down to squeeze the sides of her throat, gentle at first, but slowly tightening.

"S-Stop it- Weiss, please..."

"I thought you loved me."

Ruby opened her mouth to answer again, but before she could, Weiss' grip tightened to a vice, crushing her windpipe and choking her. She had no expression on her face as her grip got impossibly tighter, ignoring Ruby's struggles and wheezes, her arm unmoving despite Ruby's attempts to dislodge it. Ruby kicked at her, but she didn't budge.

“We..iss..” Ruby wheezed, her knees bending beneath her as she struggled. The Schnee didn’t react, her piercing gaze locked on Ruby’s as she fell.

“You told me you loved me.”

Hot tears fell from Ruby’s eyes, black dots filling her vision as she began to fade.

She did, she loved Weiss more than anything. She would say it if she could, but Ruby couldn’t make any sounds while Weiss had her hands around her throat. Any attempt just ended with her choking on her tongue, bringing forth a gargled sound.

*“You **promised.**”*

Ruby’s eyes rolled into the back of her head, her lungs about to burst. Her hands slipped from Weiss’ wrists, falling limp to rest at her sides, her struggle finally coming to an end. Weiss held her by the neck as Ruby’s last bit of life essence slipped through her fingers like grains of sand, hearing a dull crunch as her neck finally broke under the force.

*“You **lied.**”*

Ruby woke up with a start. She spent the rest of the morning crying silently, disappearing into the bathroom as soon as the alarm Blake had set went off.

Shakily releasing the breath she had been holding in, her eyes fell to look at the sink. Where she realised her hands were gripping the edge so tight her knuckles were snow white. “You’ll find her.”

It had only been a day since Ruby woke up in Beacon’s infirmary, kicking and screaming, unaware of where she was. She initially thought that she’d only been unconscious a few hours, but that was disproven by the lack of any injuries and the fact that she was where she was. The startled nurse who assisted her confirmed this as well, recounting the details of her recovery as she desperately tried to hold Ruby still to prevent the injured girl from thrashing around in panic and tearing out her IV, which she still managed to do anyway.

Everything had only gotten worse once Ruby had arrived at Ozpin's office, scraggly and barely awake. She’d ridden the elevator to the top of Beacon tower with the desperate, fleeting hope to see Weiss safe and sound and most

importantly: *alive*. Yet, when the doors finally slid open, Ruby had been horrified to find out that Weiss was still missing from the rest of their team, which only meant that those Faunus who had jumped them, the members of the White Fang, still had her in their dirty clutches.

“Ruby?”

Ruby jumped as Yang’s voice broke through her thoughts, interrupting the streak of worries that was plaguing her mind. She caught her breath, bringing her hands back to the original task, quickly finishing up clasping her crimson cape to her shoulders, “Y-yeah! I’m coming...!”

Today was the day that they set out to rescue Weiss from whatever hell she was being exposed to. The storm that had been raging over the past few days had slowly started to dissipate, leaving behind heavy showers of rain and the rumble of dangerous thunder.

Of course, Ozpin and Glynda weren’t aware of what they were going to do. A curfew had been set on all Beacon students, one that Glynda herself was enforcing. Nobody was allowed out of Beacon for any reason whatsoever, and if you were to be caught trying to escape or outside the grounds’ perimeter without permission, you could face immediate expulsion from Beacon, a rather permanent consequence, which had scared most of the students enough to listen, but not team RWBY.

Blake had spent most of the night checking out shipments coming into and from the school. She’d scoped out the dockyards where all the food supplies came in, and had found a lone pilot in a ship that was set to return to Vale by midday. Initially, he’d been reluctant to follow along, out of fear of losing his flying license but Blake had managed to convince him with a little bribery. He would take them to Vale in his ship’s cargo compartment, albeit in secret. There was a catch though, as he warned that, if they were to be late, he’d leave regardless, without a second thought.

Meanwhile, Yang had visited team JNPR across the hall to inform them of their plan. They had been a little skeptical and mostly concerned for their friends, rather than for the punishment they were risking, but they had agreed to help cover for them, should anyone ask where they’d disappeared to. The plan was to tell anyone who asked that the team had come down with the flu from being out in the rain, and that they wanted to be left alone so they could recover. Weiss’ disappearance also doubled as an excuse, one that they hoped *most* teachers would understand.

Grabbing her belt from the counter as she moved to leave, Ruby mindlessly wrapped it around herself as she had done thousands of times before. Her fingers reacted with muscle memory as she tightened it, before sliding the remaining leather beneath a loop on one end. She was fully stocked up on every ammo type of the trade, as well as Myrtenaster, should Weiss be able to wield her. It was strange holding such a light weapon, but the design suited Weiss perfectly. Sharp and elegant, yet dangerous and powerful.

"You all good to go?" Yang asked as Ruby finally emerged from the bathroom, her belt now tightened snugly against her hips. Ruby nodded quietly, glancing at her half-sister.

Yang was adjusting the mobility of her gauntlets around her wrists, their chambers opening and closing as she fine-tuned them according to the feel on her arms. Ruby could already see the incendiary rounds loaded into the clips, the red glow standing out against the sunflower yellow paint that covered Ember Celica. The way the blonde was fidgeting while preparing her weapons showed Ruby just how nervous she was about the upcoming mission, but neither member of team RBY could blame her.

They were charging in, almost completely blind, to a White Fang base that could be crawling with Paladins for all they knew and on top of that, there was a chance that Weiss wasn't even there, or *alive*. It could turn out to be all for nothing, but they had to try. Weiss was relying on them to at least *try*.

"I think so" Ruby said, reaching up onto the end of her bed and lifting Crescent Rose from where she had left her after last night's cleaning and tuning session. The weapon smelled of newly oiled steel and polish, the joints and mobile parts polished until they reflected her face back at her like a mirror. She checked to make sure the safety was on, before attaching it to the set of magnets stationed on her lower back. It attached smoothly with a click. "I've got everything I need, and then some."

She looked to Blake. "Did you bring the mask?"

The feline nodded, lifting the former White Fang Grimm mask off her hip. "Have it right here. Hopefully they fall for the same trick twice."

"They ain't exactly smart." Yang butted in, her arms folded across her chest. "I mean, they didn't cover their tracks very well."

"Don't underestimate Torchwick." Ruby warned, her voice low as she unwrapped her breakfast: a protein bar. "That girl who's always with him is the smart one. If this is the right place, and he's there, that girl will be there too."

Yang bristled, grinding her knuckles into her palm with a crack. "Oh yeah, I've got unfinished business with *her*."

“Let’s just focus on getting Weiss out of there first, Yang.” Blake commented, re-attaching the mask to her side. Ruby nodded her assent. They weren’t out for revenge. Once they were in, they needed to grab Weiss and get out as soon, and quietly, as possible. Looking for fights would only compromise their whole operation, and maybe their lives too. Yang sighed gruffly.

“Yeah, I know. Keep cool.”

“Then let’s go.” Ruby hummed, throwing the empty wrapper into the bin by one of the desks and putting her hand on the doorknob. “The pilot said he was leaving around seven.”

“Hello? This is Coco Adel speaking.”

Ruby sucked in a deep breath as the phone call finally got through, her fingers gripping tighter along the sides of her new scroll. “Coco? It’s me, Ruby.”

There was a moment of silence from the other end of the line, allowing even more of Ruby’s anxiety to grow wild. She traded a scared glance with Yang and Blake, who were sitting cross-legged across from her on the floor. Blake’s ears were perked.

“Ruby? Why are you calling from an unknown number?” Coco asked. Ruby laughed awkwardly, glancing to the ruined packaging belonging to the new scroll in her hands, which was currently lying on the floor beside her.

“We didn’t want Glynda to pick up on our phone calls.” She explained.

“...Glynda can tap our phone calls?!” Coco asked dumbfoundedly.

“Apparently. She’s connected to all our school registered scrolls...” Ruby hummed. She heard someone else’s voice in the background ask Coco who she was talking to, to which Coco shushed them and continued.

“This must be a pretty serious phone call, then.” Coco said, “Did you find something in relation to Weiss?”

Ruby hesitated, her heart panging sorely in her chest. She gulped: “Yeah... Yeah we did.”

“Well?”

“She’s in that Dust refinery you guys found.” Ruby explained, looking up to make sure she had said the right thing. Blake nodded. “She’s... being tortured-” Ruby’s voice broke mid-way through her sentence, the pestering lump swelling in her throat again.

“Oh Ruby... I’m so sorry-” Coco murmured through the phone, her voice spilling with empathy, “What’s Ozpin doing? When is he sending you guys out?”

“He’s not.”

“...Excuse me?” Coco could not believe her ears. “What do you mean he’s not sending you out?!”

Ruby’s breath hitched in her throat, tears falling from her eyes again as her fragile emotional walls broke down for the fourth time that night. She placed the scroll in the middle of the circle made up by the three members of team RBY, setting the call to speaker mode. Blake cleared her throat.

“It’s Blake. He’s locking down Beacon so that no student can get in or out.” Blake explained flatly, shuffling closer to the device in the middle of the room. “He’s alerting the army of Weiss’ predicament.”

“The old man’s finally gone crazy” Coco huffed, “which means he’ll pull us out too. Doesn’t he realise how dangerous that plan is?”

“That’s what I said!” Yang bellowed, her annoyance still evident, flaring up around her through her semblance.

“We’re going to sneak out.” Blake explained calmly, ignoring the previous remarks from the other two girls. She glanced at the piece of paper the young pilot had handed her earlier, which held the details of when they’d depart. “Tomorrow, first thing in the morning.”

“And you want us to rendezvous with you, right?” Coco asked, already having connected the dots. She sighed, “I don’t know, Ozpin would not be happy.”

“Has that ever stopped you before?” Yang said, folding her arms across her chest as the trio listened. A huff of amusement came over the speaker.

“Nope.” Coco said “We’re in. Where do we meet you guys?”

“The Dead Tree.” Blake answered quickly, checking over the note she’d been given again to make sure she was right. “We’ll be dropped there at around nine. The trees should give us enough room for cover.”

“Wait.” Interrupted Ruby, wiping her face dry with her sleeves. “You guys were near the refinery, right? What do we need to be ready for?”

“Well, a lot of White Fang grunts, that’s for sure.” Coco said, listening as someone beside her said something to her. “Yeah, those too. There’s strange Grimm tracks surrounding that refinery. Unlike anything we’ve ever seen before. Fox said they even emitted traces of something akin to an aura.”

The members of team RWBY all looked at each other with an expression of confusion, before coming back to the scroll in front of them.

“An aura?” Yang repeated, “Wait a second, I don’t pay attention half the time in Grimm studies, but I’m pretty sure Grimm don’t have those.”

“They don’t.” confirmed Blake. “In order to have aura, you need a soul. Grimm don’t have souls, they never have. Their bodies aren’t capable of housing one.”

“So you’re just as confused as we are then.”

“But Fox said he was positive he saw aura around the tracks. It was almost like it was leaking.”

*“**Leaking** aura?!” Yang asked. “Well that’s definitely new.”*

“Yeah” hummed Ruby, before shaking her head and reverting back to the original reason they’d even called CFVY in the first place. The longer the call went on, the greater the chance they had of getting caught. “We need to hurry up with this call before someone intercepts us.”

“Right.” Coco agreed, taking a long breath. “We’ll meet you three at the Dead Tree around nine tomorrow. We can discuss what happens after that.”

“Okay.” Ruby said with a sigh. “We’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Right. Good night team RWBY.”

“Night Coco.”

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Ruby tucked at the hem of her skirt nervously, the roaring sounds of the airship around her filling her ears. She debated cleaning Crescent Rose again, adding another layer of oil to the joints and making sure every bolt was tight.

“Nervous?” Yang asked, hoisting herself onto the empty crate beside Ruby and leaning into her knees. Ruby looked up at the blonde who’d settled nearby, a concerned lilac gaze piercing through her.

Ruby sighed. “Yeah..”

The elder sister's shoulders slouched slightly, her brows furrowing, "I don't blame you. If it were *Blake*..." She closed her eyes tightly and shook her head like she was trying to shake the idea from her mind. "But I'm sure she's okay, sis. Your girlfriend is like the second most determined person I have *ever* met."

Ruby's head lifted at the mention of Weiss being her girlfriend, her eyes widening as a blurry memory resurfaced at the forefront of her mind where both Weiss and herself were in the forest, under the shade of a tree and barely a breath away from each other. Her lips tingled as she remembered the soft feeling of Weiss' perfect neck. A soul crushing sadness pained her heart, a frail smile on her face.

"She... We didn't get to make it 'official' before everything happened." Ruby explained quietly. Yang's face fell from the weak hold of hope she'd managed to scavenge. Taking a shuddering breath she continued "Now... now we might not get to." Her voice broke midway through, swallowing the growing lump in her throat as her jaw began to shake.

"Oh jeez, Ruby... I didn't know." Yang quickly said, trying to catch her sister's gaze and failing. "I just thought-"

"Just forget it!" Ruby said with a huff, rubbing the tiredness from her eyes with the palm of her hand. Ruby honestly didn't know if what had happened between Weiss and her was even real considering what had followed. It felt like a lifetime had passed since Ruby had been in that forest with Weiss. Yang fell quiet for a moment, picking at the corner of her nails with her thumb. Yang shuffled slightly closer, her hot aura brushing off Ruby's.

"Did you sleep at all last night?" She asked, looking at the dark bags under her sister's eyes. Ruby shook her head quietly, reaching up to rub at her eyes again. "I could tell. You look exhausted, Rubes. Are you sure you're up for this?"

"Weiss doesn't have time to waste." Answered Ruby. "I can sacrifice a few hours of sleep."

Yang frowned deeper, cocking an eyebrow. "Can you? I mean, you were in hospital up until yesterday."

The rose shrugged, pulling her cape closer to her shoulders. "It's not like I could sleep if I wanted to." She took a heavy breath. "I'll be fine."

Yang gave Ruby a stare, putting a hand on her sister's shoulder, causing the girl to flinch in surprise. "Are you having nightmares again? Was that why you couldn't sleep? You can tell me about them if you want-"

“Yang, please.” Ruby pleaded, leaning back to meet her sister’s concerned lilac eyes. “I just want to move on and focus on getting Weiss back.”

“I’m just trying to help-” Yang mumbled.

“I know you are, but Weiss-”

“Weiss this, Weiss that-!” Yang placed both her hands on Ruby’s shoulders. “Ruby, Weiss is relying on us to rescue her. How are you going to do that if you can hardly stay awake?”

"I am awake!" Ruby grumbled, attempting to shrug away from Yang’s grip. Yang's face twisted into one of frustration, letting her hands fall from Ruby's shoulders and slap her own thighs with a sigh.

"What's with you? You're being stubborn."

Ruby ignored Yang's comment, fiddling with one of the screws along Crescent Rose. The blonde continued anyway. "Maybe spending all that time with the Ice Queen has turned you into her ice pawn. You're starting to act like her from time to time."

Ruby furrowed her brows. "What's *that* supposed to mean?!"

Yang shrugged. "I'm just saying... you haven't eaten much, haven't slept, you're obsessing over tiny details. You're neglecting yourself for the sake of others..." She huffed slightly, lying flat against the crate the two were currently on. "Keep at it and maybe we won't even need Weiss back."

Ruby's glare sharpened, unsure if her sister was joking around or being truthful. She sat up straight, her nails scraping the surface of Crescent Rose. "That's not funny, Yang."

There was a hesitant pause for a moment between the two, before Yang let out a heavy sigh. "You're right. I'm sorry."

Before either could say anything more, Blake dropped down from the hatch that led to the pilots cockpit, dusting herself off as she approached her teammates. “Pilot said we’ll be there within the next five minutes. There could be some turbulence over the forest, though.”

Ruby immediately jumped off the crate she’d been sitting on, taking the opportunity to escape the conversation between her and her sister before she said anything she’d regret. Yang sat up as she landed on the floor, lifting her arms into the air to stretch out her stiff, cold muscles, groaning as she did. “Good, get ready to drop out.”

Yang’s eyes followed Ruby as she moved towards the end of the ship, where they’d stored their supplies they’d brought along for the mission. Once Blake was sure Ruby was out of earshot, she turned to face the blonde brawler as her partner too jumped off the crate.

“What were you two talking about?” Blake asked. Yang huffed.

“Has Ruby seemed different to you?” inquired Yang, watching her sister as she double checked everything in her leather backpack.

Blake frowned. “Different in what way?”

“She’s been... I don’t know how to explain it. Just, *different*.” Yang leaned against the crate she’d been sitting on. “She’s been distant, and not... Ruby.”

“If your partner and potential girlfriend was kidnapped right in front of you, while you could do nothing but watch, wouldn’t you be distant too?” answered Blake, earning a grunt from Yang. “Ruby’s just caught up in her own thoughts right now, Yang. She’ll come to us when she’s ready.”

“And what if she’s never ready?”

Blake hummed, placing a hand on the exposed skin of Yang’s arm. “She will be. Just give her time.”

The brawler of the team sighed through her nose, sparing an appreciative glance at Blake before realising Ruby had appeared before them again, holding each of their camping bags in her hands while her own was already tightened onto her back.

“Here.” she said, fixing one of the thin leather straps against her chest as Yang and Blake shrugged their packs on. There wasn’t much in them: first aid, some rations in case of an emergency, extra ammo and Dust, as well as a few other necessities. “We should be there any minute now. C’mon.”

With a breath, she flipped the switch and the heavy metal doors in front of them slid open with a whoosh of air. Ruby’s cape whipped out from behind her, rose petals falling from the roughed up end of it. Her eyes were following the forest floor beneath them, the shadow of the ship casting on the trees far below.

“Try and focus on the mission. The faster we get Weiss back, the sooner we get to go home.” Ruby said, her grip tightening on the support rail to her right. Yang’s shoulders slumped in defeat, moving to stand alongside her sister. The red caped girl steeled herself, looking over the edge to the rushing trees below her. They were getting close. “There’s the tree. Keep your scrolls on so we can reconvene as quickly as possible.”

Ruby pointed to the largest tree in the forest, its twisted branches bare and burnt. It had been struck by lightning several decades ago during a storm, but the trunk was too thick to be cut down. The storm was said to have been brought on by the wrath of the Gods during the Great War, which instantly killed all the fruit that had once grown on its branches and thus sent the nearby village and soldiers of both sides into a famine. Nowadays, it served as a perfect landmark for travelling huntsmen who travelled across Vale on foot.

Without another word, Ruby kicked off from the edge of the ship, the roar of the wind instantly filling her ears as she fell through the air. She immediately noticed how humid it was outside, likely a remnant of the storm that had passed. Humidity meant slippery branches, Ruby noted, reaching back to unhook Crescent Rose from her belt and load the cheapest bullets she had into her chamber. Landing on the branches wasn’t a possibility without the danger of slipping through them, especially given the speed at which they were going. So Ruby had to rely on plan B.

She swung the muzzle of her scythe down towards the quickly approaching ground, before letting off her first shot. Her speed slowed substantially, however she was still in the air. Luckily for her, Crescent Rose wasn’t the lightest weapon on Remnant, so it helped in her descent. She shot another round down, and another, until finally she breached the treeline.

Extending Crescent Rose out into her full form, Ruby clipped the blade around one of the thicker branches and swung, spinning half a circle before she activated her semblance and safely fell to the ground. She rolled on contact, before hopping back up to her feet with a proud look on her face.

With a smirk, Ruby spun Crescent Rose beside her, before shifting it back to its compact mode and securing it to her back. There was always a feeling of exhilaration whenever she landed perfectly, and even more so when she did it in style. It was a shame nobody was there to witness just how awesome she'd been.

"*Focus Ruby.*" She scolded herself, shaking her head free of any distracting ideas and reaching for her scroll. She flicked it open and brought up the tracker map, finding that Blake hadn't landed too far away from her and that Yang had practically landed in the giant tree Ruby had pointed out.

Ruby glanced up, noticing the burnt branches of the tree just peaking through the leaves overhead. She wasn't extremely far away, but she still wasn't particularly close. It'd take a few minutes if she ran there. She took a sprinting stance, digging her heel into the mud and started out into her semblance, tearing leaves and berries off branches as a tornado of wind ripped through the forest. Creatures of Remnant and Grimm alike looked up at the sound, however, while some scattered, others moved towards it. The smell of roses was quickly leaving a trail for monsters to follow.

It didn't take very long for Ruby to reach her destination. The towering sight of the massive, ancient tree broke through the treetops. Up close, it must've been as tall as the CCT, maybe even taller. Branches only began to sprout 30 feet up the bark, and even those could've been the same width as the trees around them.

Finally breaking through into the clearing, her feet skidded on some of the murky ground and sent her barreling straight into the side of the tree with a yelp. She grunted as her back slammed off the thick trunk; her world spun upside down with her legs in the air. She groaned as she felt the cold mud beneath her seep through her clothes and into her hair.

"Well, that was certainly an entrance to behold, Rose Petal." came Coco's voice as her boots appeared in Ruby's view. The leader of team RWBY looked up in surprise, an embarrassed smirk appearing across her face as she found the leader of CVFY looking down at her. Ruby threw herself to the side, taking Coco's outstretched hand as she got up.

"Thanks." Ruby said, wiping thick layers of muck off the back of her legs as she looked around. She noticed Yang, Blake and Velvet laughing close by, while Yatsu and Fox just watched in amusement. Coco chuckled, wiping mud off her hand through her black jeans.

"It must run in the family." Coco joked, pointing to Yang over her shoulder. "Your sister landed 60 foot high in the tree. Velvet had to get her down."

Ruby hummed, wiping her muddy hands clean on the bark beside her. “Sounds like Yang.”

“There’s a patrol incoming!” Fox spoke quickly, stepping back into a bush and crouching down. “Hide, quickly!”

Ruby and Coco crossed glances before swiftly bolting into the trees. The crimsonette grabbed the end of her cape and pulled it to her chest as she settled into the branches, her eyes glued to the path where they’d been seconds ago as two White Fang appeared from the undergrowth. A smirk appeared on Coco’s face.

“Just what we needed.” she whispered, catching Ruby’s attention.

Ruby opened her mouth to ask what she meant, but was beaten to it as Fox and Velvet pounced from the bushes, hitting both of the Faunus in the back of the head and sending them to the ground immediately. Ruby’s mouth fell open in slight disbelief as Coco hopped down from the tree they’d been hiding in.

“Talk about killing two birds with one stone,” Blake mumbled as everyone formed around the two unconscious White Fang members. Yang grinned.

“Actually, I think that one’s a wolf.”

Ruby rolled her eyes and watched as Velvet pulled the cloaks and masks off both soldiers before tossing them to the side. Yatsu crouched down beside his partner, handing her a looped bundle of rope, “Here. This should hold them.”

“So, why are we kidnapping two White Fang?” Ruby asked, standing beside Coco as she held out the uniforms Velvet had just taken.

“For our plan.”

Ruby frowned. “And the plan is...?”

“Blake and Velvet are going to go undercover so that we can get in.” she explained briefly, looking up to face Blake and Yang nearby. “And they’re taking Yang in.”

“Why me?!” Yang protested.

Fox smirked, folding his arms across his chest and turning to stare emptily at the brute.

“Because you were the first to get here.” he said smugly. Yang huffed.

“I’m offended.”

“It’ll make us look better.” Velvet said, pulling the cloak over her clothes and smoothing it out. “And you hit harder.”

“The plan is to use Yang to knock out the front guards.” Yatsu explained as he finished pulling leaves and branches over the unconscious bodies of the White Fang guards. “Once they’ve been dealt with, we can follow you in.”

“And after that?” Ruby asked.

“We make it up as we go.” Coco replied, pushing her glasses up on her nose again. Ruby bit her lip in nerves, watching as Blake took the second White Fang uniform from Velvet without any form of hesitation. They were judging this all based on chance? Ruby thought team CFVY of all teams would have had a solid plan. What if it didn’t work, or it just led to all seven of them being captured and used for ransom or leverage against Beacon?

Coco quickly caught onto Ruby’s growing anxiety about their plan, facing the younger girl and smiling slightly. “Hey, we aren’t leaving without Weiss.”

“Damn right we’re not!” Yang piped up, smashing her gauntlets together with sparks “She ain’t dropping out of team RWBY so easily!”

Ruby frowned deeply at Yang's comment, folding her arms. "We might be too late."

"We don't know that just yet." Velvet piped up, fixing her hair beneath her hood. She moved to gently brush Ruby's shoulder, a gentle, reassuring smile on her face. She placed her hand in the middle of the rose's back, her calming aura mixing with Ruby's stiff one. "Relax, Ruby. Whatever happens, we'll be right there with you. You won't be facing this one alone."

"Sorry to interrupt you, but-" Blake said, flicking through one of the scrolls that had been on the White Fang. "These guys were only meant to be on a five minute patrol. We need to hurry."

"Let's get this show on the road, ladies and gentlemen." Coco hummed. Yatsu lifted his sword from the ground and swung it around onto his back, while Fox simply nodded. Ruby collected herself, nodding alongside the blind huntsman.

"Let's go get our friend back."

CHAPTER 9 (5.7k) (Posted.)

"Breaking Dawn"

Yang massaged her jaw where Yatsunashi had punched her, the bruise throbbing while Blake and Velvet crouched in the bushes just in front of her. She'd been instructed to not let her aura heal it because she had to make Blake and Velvet look believable, but gods did it hurt...

"Your teammate can pack one hell of a mean punch," Yang grumbled quietly, the impact on her chin slowly slowly darkening. Yatsu had been very hesitant to hit Yang without her aura active despite her insisting several times, telling him that she'd been hit by a giant hydraulic robot before and lived. If anything, that seemed to make him even more nervous. In the end, it had been Velvet who'd convinced him to hit her, and *man* had it been a hit. Yang was jealous.

“There, look.” Blake whispered to Velvet, motioning towards another White Fang duo that were approaching the main entrance. They waved to the two guards by the door, before stepping inside the abandoned building. Velvet’s rabbit ears pointed in that direction.

“I didn’t hear a password or anything,” Velvet said, looking back to Yang and then to Blake, “Think we should go?”

“Yeah.” Blake responded, fastening the Grimm mask over her eyes with a click. She crouched before Yang, holding out some braided rope in front of her. “Your hands.”

Yang did as she was ordered, turning around and putting her hands together behind her back. As she felt Blake wrap the thick, tan rope around her wrists loosely, she grinned, “Jee Kitkat, if you were into bondage you shoulda just told me.”

She was met with a solid hit to the side of the head, “Shut up, Yang.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Yang teased, hearing Blake sigh hard behind her. Velvet was chuckling nearby, a faint blush beneath the mask on her face at Yang’s antics. Yang winked at her. “Let’s get this show on the road, ladies.”

“Coco?” Velvet whispered, pressing a well hidden com in her rabbit ear, “We’re going in, you ready?”

“Ready as we can be. Good luck, Velv’,” Came the reply.

“Remember, Yang, make it look realistic,” Blake whispered from behind Yang, faintly holding the ends of the rope loose so Yang could escape when she needed to. Yang nodded.

The trio finally emerged from the bushes, with Velvet leading Yang towards the main door. Almost immediately, the two guards at the door noticed them and pointed their rifles towards them, startled by the sudden appearance of the three figures. Yang began to wriggle in Blake’s grasp, grunting and growling as she faked her attempt to break free.

“*Let me go*, you disgusting animals!” She roared, grinding her teeth together as she jerked her body around. “I’ll kill you all! Release me and see how strong I really am!” Blake smirked at the acting in front of her, before clearing her throat and growing serious.

“Silence yourself, human! Or I’ll make sure to personally mount you on my wall as a rug!” Blake roared back over the blonde brute in her hands. Velvet straightened herself as they finally reached the door, both grunts looking at Yang like she was some form of wild animal. Blake kicked the back of Yang’s knee, prompting her to fall to the floor with a growl.

“Animals! Every one of you!” She spat, wincing as Blake knotted her fingers in her hair and tugged her chin up to face the white fang guards in front of her, earning a pained hiss from Yang at the motion. Blake lightened her grip upon feeling the hint of pain that wavered through Yang’s aura.

“Jeez, a wild one you got there,” one of the grunts commented, lifting his rifle to aim at Yang’s neck lazily. Yang spat at him, to which he chuckled, “Damn, she’s got some balls.”

“You’re telling us,” Velvet commented, cradling her ribs and fake-wincing as she gripped too hard, “She got some good hits in before we got her down.”

“Do you need to see the healer?” The second guard asked, keeping his distance from Yang as she growled at them. Blake shook her head, forcing Yang back down again.

“I said be *silent!*” Blake threatened with another light tug, “We’re fine. Did anything change while we were gone?”

The one pointing a rifle at Yang laughed, moving his weapon to settle on his shoulder, “Not really. That Schnee girl is still kicking, though. The guys should be back from Vacuo soon with that mind control semblance too. The Schnee’s downfall is near.”

Blake and Velvet crossed glances. A mind control semblance?

“What mind control semblance?” Velvet asked, before smiling awkwardly, “Ah, sorry. I only got here in the last few days. I’m actually supposed to be a technician.”

The guard waved her off, “Don’t worry, we hardly know anything either. Apparently they’re going to try and control the Schnee we got, turn her against her own family or something weird like that.” He stopped to think for a second, looking to the second guard behind him. “Think they were doing some power enhancing experiments or something? I dunno, but the bitch didn’t shut up for *hours*. I thought I’d never sleep.”

Yang froze in her struggles, also processing what she had been hearing. The air around the faunus grew hot as the brawler’s semblance began to flicker to life, “Schnee...? *You’re* the sick bastards who kidnapped her?!”

“The one and only sweetheart,” He crouched down onto one knee, meeting Yang’s furious, red gaze, “Maybe Roman will let you see her before you turn into one of those creatures.”

Blake bristled, the fur on her ears standing on end as she listened to the man laugh in front of her. Yang’s fists balled behind her and she tugged, a sign she wanted to be let go as her hair began to catch fire. Blake happily let go of the rope around Yang’s wrists, giving Yang free reign to take out the soldiers when she was ready. The blonde flexed her hands, fully activating her semblance in a bright flash and putting all her strength from Yatsu’s punch into her fists.

“You *ASSHOLES!*” Yang screamed, tearing forward and driving her fist into the closest guards face. She felt a satisfying crunch under her knuckles as she broke his nose, before swinging again to ensure the man was out cold for a *long* time. He didn’t move after the second hit, the white mask on his face smashed into pieces and on the ground around his head.

The second grunt let out a yell of surprise, lifting his gun to shoot at Yang in defense. Blake appeared before him, swiftly batting the gun out of the way with her arm and kicking him in the ribs with a powerful kick. The man flew back, the attack launching him into the side of one of the nearby trucks. He grunted and crumbled to the floor as he succumbed to the pain shocking his body. Blake kicked him in the side of the head, knocking him unconscious.

Yang stood back up, kicking the grunt by her feet in fury, “*That’s* for what you did to Weiss, you sick freaks.”

“You’re clear,” Blake said into the comm in her ear, pulling the White Fang mask off her face and tossing it to the ground in disgust. She ground her heel into it, shattering the cheap plastic with a harsh snap.

“Why do you think they want a mind control semblance for Weiss?” Yang asked the two faunus as the others jumped from their hiding positions. Velvet took her own mask off, carefully pulling her ears from the slots in the cape’s hood. “To mess with her father?”

“Maybe,” Velvet said, finally freeing her long brown rabbit ears and massaging the base of them where the coat had been clinging uncomfortably to them, “If the White Fang gets their hands on a semblance like that, they’ll have a lot of power. They could get anyone on their side.”

Blake helped Yang as she pushed the unconscious bodies of the guards beneath one of the dust trucks, hiding them from plain sight, “We can let Glynda know once we get back.”

“If we’re allowed back,” Yang pitched in, wiping off the blood on her knuckles onto the side of the truck. “Oz seemed pretty serious about the expelling thing.”

Neither of the faunus got a chance to respond as the second half of the team appeared. Coco led them, followed by Ruby, Fox and Yatsushashi. The giant had to squat awkwardly behind one of the trucks to keep from prying eyes.

“Good work, girls” Coco commented, looking at the doorless entry that led into the main building. The main lobby seemed empty, so they had a moment to collect themselves. “What did you learn?”

“We know Weiss is alive,” Velvet said, not missing how relief seemed to light up in Ruby’s eyes, “At least, they said she was.”

“Is that everything?”

“No,” Blake said, “They’re trying to find a mind controlling semblance to use on her. They also mentioned experimenting.” Sad amber eyes flickered to Ruby as she stiffened, her mind flashing back to the video Ozpin had shown them the night before. Tears formed in Ruby’s eyes as the disturbing images came to the front of her mind again.

Ruby’s grip tightened on Crescent Rose, and she swallowed the lump that had grown in her throat. Weiss was alive. She was alive. It was almost like a weight had been lifted from Ruby’s shoulders, only to be replaced with doubts as other ideas crawled forth from the depths of her mind. Could they trust these White Fang to be telling the truth? They were only guards after all. Who knew if their information was accurate?

“We need to hurry then. Fox, can you pick up on Weiss’ aura at all?” Coco asked, looking at her blind partner. The man nodded at Myrtenaster that sat lonely on Ruby’s hip.

“I can, thanks to her weapon.” He took a deep breath, ‘looking’ around as he followed invisible aura trails only his semblance could see. His head fell to the ground, a deep frown settling on his face. “She’s here, but she’s a few levels below us. It’s so faint, I can barely see it.”

Ruby suddenly pushed past Coco, bumping her shoulder as she moved into the refinery. Coco’s eyes widened behind her sunglasses, but she quickly followed, looking back to the others, who were just as surprised by the suddenness of it all.

“Come on. We’re following her lead.”

The leader of team RWBY armed Crescent Rose, a clip full of paralysing Dust loading into the chamber as she pressed further into the domain of the White Fang. She could hear the others following her, Coco close behind as she tried to discover a way down to where they were holding Weiss.

“It’s spooky in here,” Yang whispered.

Ruby hummed in agreement, looking to her faunus teammate as Blake’s ears swiveled around. Her eyes were wide as she listened, her vision much clearer than any of the others. Ruby’s own hearing wasn’t amazing, but even still, she could hear a faint murmuring of voices echoing down the halls.

The slow, taunting drip of water nearby put Ruby on edge, the sound almost filling her mind. In a way, it was tranquil and relaxing, but it also revealed just how silent this area was. Any loud moves and the White Fang would be on them like wolves on rabbits-

A dull clatter almost made Ruby leap out of her skin, her eyes finally readjusted to the darker interior. A mouse jumped in front of her, sending a plastic petrol can rolling across the floor. She heard Velvet sigh loudly behind her, feeling the panic rolling off her aura as she calmed back down.

“Definitely spooky,” the rabbit faunus mumbled.

Ruby frowned, looking around in the dimly lit room. It was empty save for an old reception desk with a decorative, half broken marble wall behind it. There were heavy wooden Dust crates stacked near the reception desk, all stamped with the SDC logo. There had to be a map of the layout somewhere.

“What’s the plan?” Coco asked quietly, crouched beside Ruby as the group snuck in, “We need to find a way down.”

Ruby quickly hopped over the desk when she reached it, frowning at the mess of papers scattered all over the floor, “There has to be a fire escape map, or a technician map- *something*, somewhere here.” She started carefully pulling open filing drawers, many of the documents gone, likely taken when the refinery shut down. “Maybe it’ll have a route to the lower levels.”

Coco pointed to Velvet. “Velv, come here.”

The rabbit appeared without a second thought, eyes glancing over the documents Ruby was rummaging through in interest. “What can I do?”

“You’re a technician,” Coco started, “Do you know where they would keep a technician map?”

The girl hummed in thought, “Not specifically. I do know where blueprints *could* be, though.”

“Where?” Ruby asked, perhaps a little too eagerly judging from Velvet’s taken aback expression. The Faunus sat back on her haunches, pulling her scroll off her back.

“Usually they’re kept in a filing cabinet, but because this was a Schnee Dust Company building,” she was typing something into her scroll while she spoke, a triumphant smile on her face as she pulled up a webpage and held it up for the two leaders to look at, “I should be able to find the original blueprints on their servers somewhere.”

Ruby’s eyes widened in slight surprise at the sight. She didn’t know Velvet was a hacker-

“Oh *shit!*” Ruby heard a voice hiss.

“Hey!”

Ruby perked her head over the receptionist desk in surprise, only for Yang to push it down as she vaulted over the desk, “Get down!”

A barrage of bullets flew above them, splintering the wood as it skimmed off the desks surface. Ruby squealed in surprise, pressing her back against the wood in surprise as she readjusted herself for a fight. Fox had also jumped over the reception desk, while Yatsu and Blake hid behind pillars that supported the second floor.

“Where did they come from?!” Coco called over the gunfire.

“They just appeared out of nowhere!” Yang called back, loading non-lethal Dust into Ember Celica. Ruby’s eyes fell to Yang’s leg where her aura was actively knitting together a bullet graze, guilt pooling in her chest.

Maybe this really was just a suicide mission.

“There!” Velvet called, just as the first wave of gunfire ended. Both Yang and Coco popped up, unloading their weapons into the enemies they were being attacked by. Ruby looked up as the rabbit Faunus scooted closer, holding out her scroll for Ruby to take.

Ruby took the device in her hand, finding a picture of a blueprint on the screen. There were two more levels beneath them, a storage level and a laboratory level. Ruby’s eyes narrowed, zooming in on the entrances down below. Coco dropped back into cover with a gasp, her gatling gun smoking as a shot ricocheted off the wood where she’d been standing a second earlier.

“Yikes, that was close.”

Ruby ignored her, zooming into the image of the main lobby where they were. There was a staircase behind the wall that led down to the storage floor. Ruby looked around her. There wouldn’t be cover if they were to leave the reception desk to go around, they’d be shredded by bullets.

“Ruby- we need to move!” Yang cried, changing to Ember Celica’s shotgun mode.

“Working on it!” called Ruby, lifting her head back over the desk to get a better overview of what was going on. The White Fang had pooled in from either side of them, closing them in in a semicircle. She didn’t notice the strange formation in her blind panic, ducking back down under the desk as a shotgun blast flew above her. She gulped.

Ruby turned to Coco, handing Velvet’s scroll back as she got ready to cover her friend. They might not be able to go around the wall, but nobody said they couldn’t go *through* it.

“Coco, destroy the wall behind us! I’ll cover you.” Ruby ordered, whipping Crescent Rose over the quickly deteriorating reception desk and taking aim. Yang, Fox and Blake had done a good job taking out some of the White Fang, but more and more seemed to pool from the hallways on either side of them and close the little space they had left. Ruby narrowed her eyes, aiming at the first target she could find. There was a crack as she unloaded, electricity surrounding the faunus she’d shot as he fell to the ground, twitching. Almost immediately, two more took his place.

“I like your style,” Coco commented, pressing her back to Ruby’s and unloading Gianduja into the wall as instructed. Thanks to her Dust empowering semblance, the wall chipped away quickly, sending pebbles and brick chunks everywhere. Ruby grunted as a bullet hit her in the shoulder, her aura deflecting it. She ducked back down temporarily, holding the sore spot as her aura healed it.

“Ruby, are you okay?!” Velvet asked, having scurried closer to their makeshift cover when Coco started shooting at the wall. Ruby grunted in response, massaging the sore spot with her palm. Whatever damage had been done had already started to heal.

“I’ll be okay” she said, looking up as Coco finished destroying the wall. Just as the map had said, there was a staircase leading up to the next level that looked long destroyed, as well as one leading down to storage. Ruby’s eyes lit up, and she pulled her cape over the charred mark on her shoulder.

Coco folded her weapon back into its handbag form, dusting the white powder off her clothes before falling back into a crouch, “Wall’s down!”

“Let’s go!” Ruby cried, taking a step back from the desk as she unloaded one last round before turning and making a beeline towards the stairs. She could feel Velvet’s aura brushing off her own as she ran, the rabbit Faunus holding out on using her own weapon.

The seven huntsmen dove beneath the stairs for cover, Yatsunashi and Yang covering them as they raced down the splintering stairs. Blake and Velvet led the way, their eyes more tuned to the quickly fading light. If the lobby was dark, then this place was pitch black. Ruby could hardly see, her only light being the hot glow coming from the tip of Coco's gun and Yang's blonde hair.

However, even in that light, she knew she'd messed up.

The darkness suddenly disappeared as a white flash filled Ruby's eyes, the sudden change making her eyes water. She blinked the water out, squinting as she faced their next opponents. A few White Fang Lieutenants were dotted around, sitting on old machines and conveyor belts with weapons the size of Yatsunashi. In the middle, almost welcoming them, stood a single pink and brown haired girl.

And in the back...

Ruby's mouth dried up as she met eyes with Weiss, her partner dressed in a white shirt and black suit pants. Her hair was down, which covered some of the bandages that covered every part of her skin except for her face. Her eyes held an unspoken fury as she stared silently.

"Weiss..?" Ruby muttered, Yang and Yatsu finally catching up to the main group. Coco and Velvet shifted nervously, eyeing the lieutenants as they packed closer together. Yang pushed her way up until she was beside Ruby, where she immediately tensed up.

"You." She growled at the small girl. Neo simply waved, looking back as Weiss pushed herself from the wall and walked up beside her. Yang looked across to her teammate, disturbed.

"What the.. Weiss? What are you doing?" Yang asked, voicing everyone's thoughts. Weiss didn't answer, simply looking to Neo as if sharing a silent conversation with her. The mute girl shrugged and gestured ahead.

"I am doing what I've always wanted to," Weiss spoke, her voice hoarse but leveled and hard. "I'm taking over the Schnee Dust Company with the help of some powerful allies."

"You hate the White Fang," Ruby muttered. Blake shuffled closer, leaning into Ruby's ear.

"She's probably under the effects of that mind control semblance," Blake explained briefly, "That's not Weiss."

“I got that much,” Ruby whispered back.

“I don’t like the White Fang, no, but,” Weiss summoned a glyph over her palm, the once faintly glowing blue now a vibrant light, “You can’t argue with results. We both simply want the same outcome. What’s a few weeks with some enemies?”

“Weiss, listen to me” Ruby took a tentative step forward, folding up Crescent Rose and hooking it onto her back, ignoring the smirk that grew on Neo’s face as she did, “You’re being manipulated. This isn’t you.”

Weiss frowned as Ruby got closer, “You’re mistaken, Ruby. This is all out of my own volition.”

“Weiss, no” Ruby said back, tears forming in the corners of her eyes as she paced even closer. “You’ve been brainwashed. We can help you. Just trust us.”

“Ruby...” Yang moved to take a step forward, only for Blake to grab her by the wrist and hold her back, earning a glare back at her raven haired partner, “Blake, what are you-?”

“Something’s not right,” Blake whispered quietly, almost too quiet for Yang to even hear.

“What? What’dya mean?”

“I don’t think that’s our Weiss.”

Yang huffed, “She’s right there. How is that *not* Weiss?”

The Faunus frowned, ochre eyes watching their emotionless white haired teammate as Ruby crept closer, “I know, but you saw the video, right? That was *yesterday*, there’s no way Weiss would be this healed that quickly.”

Yang's eyes widened, looking up to Yatsu and Fox, who seemed like they also understood what Blake was talking about. Fox nodded, using his semblance to speak telepathically to Yang.

"Weiss' aura hasn't moved since we got here. She's still a level below us."

"Then..." Velvet whispered.

"Weiss, please listen to me. I'm trying to help," Ruby whimpered, stopping a few steps before doppelganger, who was watching her with an air of disinterest. She hadn't heard Fox's voice in her moment of stress and anxiety. "I know you're still in there. Just come with us, we can get you help."

"No" Weiss spoke harshly, taking a step closer to Ruby and grasping her shoulder. Ruby frowned, the touch unfamiliar. It was... more masculine than Ruby knew. "I'm not Weiss anymore."

"RUBY! IT'S A TRAP!" Coco screamed, her voice reaching Ruby like a lightning strike. The illusion shattered like glass, the flying splinters revealing 'Weiss' to be a wolf Faunus with long, silver hair and a controller gripped tightly in his hand. A rhythmic beeping sounded just above Ruby's head, catching the youngest's attention.

A bomb was strapped to the ceiling.

"Long live the White Fang!"

Ruby dove to the ground as the bomb exploded, sending her body rolling as fire and shrapnel stuck into her back with a scream. Her head hit off a wall from the force of the explosion, sending her into pitch black darkness.

A dull boom shook the chains above Weiss' head, drawing the heiress out from unconsciousness as her body swayed softly. Her eyesight was blurry and dim, but she could see dust falling from the roof a few inches ahead of her. Confused, Weiss lifted her neck, the motion sending fresh tidal waves of agony coursing through her shoulders. She flinched, abandoning any thought of moving as she let her head fall.

Darkness threatened her vision again, swallowing her sight up whole as she became weightless once more.

“Ruby! Ruby, come on, wake up!”

Ruby groaned as a voice called through the blistering darkness, lifting her arms above her head to cover her eyes as she came to. A headache attacked her mind, as well as a faint burning sensation across her back. She could smell something burnt... and whatever that was, it smelt foul.

“Ruby!” The voice called again, sounding as if it was on the verge of tears. Ruby groaned in response, lightly tapping the trembling hands shaking her as a sign to stop.

“I’m awake, I’m awake” she grumbled, dropping her hands from her face and sitting up. Her back felt tight and hot, and she could feel her aura already healing whatever damage had been done. She coughed when she tasted smoke, wiping water from her eyes as she recollected her thoughts. Velvet was watching her, her rabbit ears pinned back in anxiety as Ruby recovered.

“Hey Rose Petal, you with us?” Coco asked from behind, prompting Ruby to glance over her shoulder. Coco’s glasses were cracked, but she still wore them. Her clothes were torn in a few places, but Ruby couldn’t see any cuts. She took a breath, holding the side of her head as her headache died away.

“Yeah, I’m with you,” Ruby confirmed, stumbling clumsily to her feet. She would’ve fallen if Velvet hadn’t caught her, a firm grasp holding her upright as her surroundings stopped spinning. “I’m okay, Velvet.”

“We were worried,” Velvet murmured.

“You were out for a little while,” Coco explained, standing up from the ground and dusting herself off, “We’re lucky to even be alive.”

“What are you talking...” Ruby spun to face Coco, noticing a giant slab of the upper floor had fallen down on top of them. Yang, Blake and Fox were nowhere to be seen, while Yatsunashi was attempting, and failing, to chip away at the heavy concrete and steel. “Shoot.”

“The bomb destroyed one of the pillars, and the other couldn’t hold the floor,” Velvet explained further, “But Yang, Blake and Fox are alright. They’re trying to reach out for help at Beacon.”

“Then we need to go and get Weiss,” Ruby groaned, wincing as she twisted a tender spot on her back, “We should have enough time before help gets here.”

Coco and Velvet crossed glances, before picking up their weapons, which they had laid on the floor. Ruby kicked Crescent Rose up into her grip with a swift motion, frowning at the new scuff and dent marks along its frame. She transformed it back into its compact sniper mode, unloading the clip to see how many bullets she had left.

Velvet walked over towards Yatsu, who was busy trying to find weak points in the concrete. The giant of a man turned around as his smaller partner approached, a warm smile on his face. He crouched down to talk to Velvet, their conversation too quiet for Ruby to pick up. The red reaper watched silently in the background, biting her lip sharply as her throat got tight.

“I’m not Weiss anymore.”

What if they didn’t get Weiss back? What if whatever illusion had played out before them minutes ago was what awaited them further downstairs? A strained breath of air escaped Ruby at the thought. Weiss would be fighting against them, her own family. The way she’d acted in the illusion had been painful, but accurate to Ruby’s worst fears. Ruby gulped, the air hurting her throat as she swallowed.

“You alright, kid?”

She looked up as Coco appeared beside her, holding her suitcase tightly between her fingers. Through her cracked sunglasses, Ruby could see Coco’s concerned gaze. It was demanding, but gently so.

“I will be.” Ruby responded quickly, before moving the heavy steel doors that had been blown off in the explosion out of the way of their descent. She heard Coco sigh, mutter something about being a headstrong idiot before following behind her to help.

Beyond the bent doors looked to be an underground labyrinth of some kind, a metal path that had several different branching exits. Dull white lights shone from either side of the steel, lighting the curved roof up lightly. Thick, heavy cables lined the walls, held tight against them with steel clips and pins, the humming of electricity echoing down the long, empty passage.

“Well, that’s certainly not what I was expecting,” Coco commented, stepping down onto the first metal step that led onto their path.

“I don’t think this is from the war,” Ruby said, her eyes darting around looking for anything that might jump them. Coco nodded ahead of her.

“It might’ve been a bunker once, but nothing like this,” She stopped and turned back to the door she’d passed through, where Velvet was now standing. “You coming?”

“Yatsu and I are going to stay here,” the rabbit Faunus replied, her hand resting on the camera box on her hip, “We’ll make sure no more White Fang follow you, and besides, I don’t have any weapons small enough to go with you... and I’m pretty sure Yatsu won’t fit on that rail.”

Coco chuckled, worming a frail smile from Ruby’s lips, “You’re probably right. Be safe, alright? I don’t want to be carrying you out on my back, ya hear?”

Velvet laughed back, “We will, Coco, and you too.”

Without another moment wasted, Velvet disappeared back out of sight, likely going back to her own partner. Coco let out a sigh, before shuffling her gatling gun purse in her hands and moving into a pace. Her boots clicked off the metal with every step.

Ruby jogged to catch up with her, shivers crawling down her spine, “What now?”

“Now,” started the brunette, “we go and find somebody who knows where your partner is. This is a lab, so there's got to be scientists somewhere.”

“Ah,” Ruby muttered, glancing down one of the paths as she passed one. There was a glass cage or something at the end, but the front was shattered, like something had broken out of it. She stopped, looking at the sight further. There were strange claw marks gouged into the metal walls and floor, much smaller than any creature Ruby had seen before.

“Coco?”

The leader of team CFVY stopped and turned around at Ruby’s whisper, her brows furrowing as she noticed Ruby’s locked on stare, “What did you find?”

“I don’t know, but look,” Ruby stepped down the hall, carefully stepping over large chunks of glass as she got closer. Coco appeared around the corner as Ruby reached the first of the claw marks. Whatever had attacked must’ve had claws sharper than an Ursa, judging by how the metal bent and tore around the mark. It was clean, and precise. Ruby didn’t even want to guess what the dark stain beside it was.

“Those look like the claw marks we found before,” Coco commented, walking past Ruby and pressing her hand to one of the larger marks, “The ones we told you about. They had traces of aura on them.”

“Do you think they were attacked by those Grimm?” Ruby questioned, earning her an honest shrug from the older woman behind her.

“I can’t say. Those ‘Grimm’ could’ve come from here for all we know.”

Ruby frowned in surprise, looking over her shoulder to Coco, “Like, Grimm experiments?”

“Maybe. Those guards did say they were doing experiments earlier.”

Ruby’s blood turned to ice. If they were experimenting on Grimm here, what were they doing to Weiss? Panic seized control over Ruby, her heart rate speeding up as thoughts berated her mind. Coco must’ve connected the dots at the same time, the warm colour melting from her cheeks.

“You don’t think...?” Ruby whispered, her voice cracking. Coco shook her head, fixing the broken glasses on her face in an attempt to hide her eyes from view.

“We need to stay hopeful. We don’t know...” Coco’s words trailed off as she became silent. Ruby fell quiet in response, straining her hearing. There were footsteps approaching on the metal, and a faint rustling of papers. The two team leaders’ eyes met, quiet understanding shared between them.

Whoever was coming was their ticket to Weiss.

Ruby carefully scampered over beside Coco, their presence hidden by a wall. Every footstep grew closer and closer, the sound of heavy feet hitting the metal grit bouncing off the walls. Ruby could hear a voice now, and it was a man by the sound of it.

“This is ridiculous. We’re under attack and I still have to run tests on these gods forsaken subjects!” came a mutter, “You’d think that, after killing almost 40 men, they’d just leave them be but *no*, it’s all in ‘*the name of science!*’ They’re all criminally insane.”

Ruby frowned, disinterested in the man’s mumblings. Coco held back a frustrated groan, leaning her head back as a shadow appeared before them. Ruby heard the sound of glass being kicked, and opted to pull her hood over her head, switching off Crescent Rose’s safety with a quick flick of her thumb.

The man finally appeared, donned in a white coat and thick rubber gloves. He was a Faunus of some kind, Ruby noted, judging by the markings along his neck and the side of his face. Ruby nodded to Coco, who nodded back.

“Hands up, White Fang!” Coco demanded, transforming Gianduja back into its main form and pressing the barrel to the scientist’s back. The man froze instantly, dropping his clipboard and what looked to be a cattle prod on the floor in a heartbeat.

“P-please, if you’re going to kill me, just do so!” he whimpered, his hands trembling on either side of his head, “I’m as good as dead anyway.”

Ruby felt a vein of pity strike her heart, but still leveled Crescent Rose to the faunus’ body. She discreetly clicked on safety mode again, “We’re not going to kill you. We just want you to show us where the Schnee is.”

The Faunus paused for a second, “Wait, you’re not-”

“Answer her question,” Coco threatened, nudging the man again with her gun.

“Sh-She’s being held not too far away! But I need to warn you, the other White Fang were coming back with some kind of semblance today. She might not be there anymore” he explained, his hands falling from the air slightly. Ruby gulped, her nails digging into Crescent Rose.

“Then you better hurry up and lead us to her,” Coco pushed the man forward, causing him to stagger, “Or else we’ll feed you to whatever made those gashes in the floor there.”

That seemed to scare him, the Faunus’ features turning sheet white at the idea, “O-of course. Just follow m-me.”

Chapter 10 (6.08k) (Posted.)

Run

The further into the tunnels the scientist led them, the deeper and darker the hole in Ruby’s stomach grew. Every corner that came and went, Ruby expected to be jumped out of nowhere... or to run into...

“I’m not Weiss anymore.”

She shook her head, trying to escape the intrusive thoughts that tainted her vision. Weiss was alive, and this scientist was leading them to her. They weren’t too late. Ruby took a heavy breath, willing the weight and the feeling of pure wrongness to leave her body. She could barely focus like this.

“How much farther?” Coco asked, earning a frustrated huff from the hostage scientist in front of her.

“Not much, but we have to take the *long way*, so the other scientists don’t see us.” he quickly explained. Coco scoffed out a laugh, looking back to Ruby with an impressed smirk.

“He’s clever.”

Ruby hummed in agreement, her silver eyes following newly patched gouges along the surfaces of the facility. They all looked like they’d belonged to the same Grimm, but why they were so far into the tunnels, was yet to be seen.

“What made those marks on the walls?” Ruby asked quietly, rubbing her knuckles off one of the gouges in the steel railing as she passed it, “They’re not from any Grimm I’ve ever seen...” The sharp edges had been filed down, leaving only an incave from the attack. The faunus let out a tense breath, shaking his head.

“Trust me, you don’t want to know.” he muttered, the air of fear surrounding it not going unnoticed by the two huntresses. Ruby and Coco crossed nervous glances.

“You better not be leading us to any of them.” Coco threatened.

“N-no! I’d rather be shot by you than enter one of their cages!” he stammered.

Ruby hung onto that thought a little longer. The only time she had ever heard of Grimm being in cages was during the war, when power hungry warlords would set them in arenas to kill people as a sick form of entertainment for their people.

Another knife of terror pricked in Ruby’s heart at the image of Weiss being thrown into one of those arenas, weaponless and hurt. Ruby bit her quivering lip sharply, wincing as copper began to seep onto her tongue. She spat it from her mouth, wiping her tongue discreetly on her sleeve in a weak attempt to rid herself of the foul taste.

A faint humming began to fill the halls as they paced ahead, combined with what looked to be glass displays not too far from where they were walking. Ruby could sense the atmosphere in the tunnel change as they got closer, pure negative emotion crushing down on her very soul and pinning her to her own despair and anxiety. Tears stung Ruby’s

eyes at the thought of doing anything anymore, urging her to blink away the salty liquid in confusion, “Gah, w-what is that?”

Beside her, Coco felt the same weight growing on her body, Gianduja slouching in her grip a bit. She grunted uncomfortably, pushing the dead weight of her weapon back into the middle of the struggling scientist’s back. He took a breath and straightened himself.

“One of Torchwick’s experiments.” he explained, leading Ruby and Coco past a tall glass window that displayed a cage. Inside were tall, humanoid figures, covered in thick Grimm ooze that pooled on the floor where it dripped. It looked far more humanoid than any Grimm Ruby had even seen, hunched over on its hands and feet with a thick white layer of armour sprouting around its body. It looked up, sensing the feeling of negativity in the air, hollow red eyes staring straight at Ruby. It opened its mouth and tensed, screaming silently.

“Why can’t we hear it?” Coco asked as the Grimm began to claw its way closer to the glass, its legs limp and unmoving. The scientist cleared his throat, and Ruby shuffled a few feet away from the glass in fear.

“Th-” The man hesitated, looking away from the cage, “He- It’s a special type of Grimm, some twisted hybrid between a Haven breed and an Atlas breed.” he explained.

“Why do you have Grimm like that?” Ruby asked, glad to be leaving the Grimm behind just as it reached out. She could hear its head press up against the glass as she passed the next cage, this one empty.

“We biologically enhance them; give them new abilities, see what inconsistencies we can remove. We make them better for the tournaments.”

Ruby’s stomach fell to the floor. *Tournaments?*

“You better not have done any of that to Weiss...” Ruby growled. The man stiffened, and Ruby watched as his throat bobbed when he gulped. For a minute, a white fury burned in her chest, her finger tightening on the trigger of Crescent Rose.

“W- We didn’t want to-” he began, before quickly continuing in an attempt to fend for himself, “B-but Torchwick gave us no choice! It was her, or we became one of those Abominations. You have to understand, we all have families, *children*, to feed.”

Ruby grit her teeth together, her trigger finger trembling by her side. Her thumb hovered above the safety lock for a beat, before resting just beside it. Maybe under different circumstances Ruby might've felt bad for him, but not anymore. The scientists could've called for help, or put up a fight. *Weiss* had a family too. Suddenly Ruby was starting to understand why she had had such a problem with Blake when she found out.

"There-" the man stopped, nodding to one of the heavy metal doors built flat against the wall a few feet ahead of them. Ruby's heart plummeted, shoving past the scientist towards the door. She hooked Crescent Rose onto her back and ran, reaching the doors quickly.

"Weiss?!" Ruby called desperately, looking around the door for a way to open it. There was no call back, no voice back that Ruby longed to hear so desperately.

Tears stung in Ruby's silver pools as she whipped back to look at the man, her glare sharper than any knife on Remnant. "*Open the door.*"

The man flinched, lifting his hand and brushing it against the smooth wall without any hesitation. He stopped halfway down the door, pressing against a concealed pad and revealing a digital screen behind it. He straightened his jacket with trembling hands as a blue glow surrounded his chest and name badge, remaining there for a second before fading away. Ruby listened as the door beeped, followed by what sounded like a locking mechanism starting to unhinge.

"There. I did what you asked. Now let me go," he said, meeting Ruby's glance as she anxiously waited for the door to open. She ignored him.

"You're going to wait here." Coco mumbled, tasing the man and watching as he crumpled to the floor unconscious. Guilt immediately pooled in her stomach, but she told herself that that was what they had been taught to do in this situation, and instead set out on tying him to one of the railing bars behind them.

Ruby pushed herself into the room when the door pulled back enough for her to squeeze through, squinting as her eyes were met by a blindingly white room. She blinked the blindness from her sight, noticing the hanging figure in the center of it.

That was the moment Ruby's world ceased to exist.

“*WEISS!*” She screeched, rushing over to her motionless, partially naked partner. In the blink of an eye, Ruby unleashed her scythe’s blade and cleaved through the metal chains holding Weiss’ wrists above her head. She fell like a sack of flour, collapsing into Ruby’s outstretched arms with a hard thump. She felt so *light*.

Ruby cradled Weiss gently but securely, reclipping Crescent Rose on her back awkwardly. Ruby’s throat tightened along with her grip, choking on the bulge in her throat as she spoke, “W-Weiss? C-Can you hear me?” She lifted her hand to Weiss’ face, brushing some of her matted bangs from her eyes with trembling fingers. She looked so peaceful, even with dried blood crusted at the corner of her mouth.

“Weiss...” Ruby choked, her voice breaking while she pressed her palm against the smaller girl’s cheek. She was so, so cold to the touch, and her skin was practically translucent. Ruby could see every vein up her neck and around her eyes, like someone had marked her skin with blue tattoos. Ruby clutched her head closer, wiping her own tears from Weiss’ face as she sobbed. “I’m sorry... I’m *so* sorry...”

She was too late. It was all her fault.

She had promised Weiss she’d be there for her, she was supposed to be her partner, she was supposed to *protect* her. It was her idea to go to that market, her fault they were followed. Weiss was gone- How was she going to explain this to anyone? She didn’t... Gods, *Weiss*...

“Ruby, is-” Coco started, noticing the smaller girl on the ground with Weiss clutched close in her arms, “Oh no...” The elder woman hesitated as she realized what she was looking at. She laid her purse down by the door and moved closer, moving around Ruby’s sobbing body to drop down before her. “Oh Ruby, I’m so sorry.”

Silence settled between them for a moment, Ruby hugging Weiss’ body tight to her own warmth as she cried. Coco felt her heart shatter for the young second year. She knew how close the two girls had gotten over the couple years they’d known each other. To lose someone so close- Coco couldn’t even imagine the pain she’d be in if she lost any of her team.

Her brows knotted in sorrow at the sight of Weiss’ pale, broken body. She reached out and held one of Weiss’ wrists, pressing her thumb barely to the vein, hoping to sense something- *anything* that told her Weiss was still alive. Her eyes widened when she felt a weak thump against her skin, followed by another a few seconds later, “She- she’s alive!”

Ruby looked up, her eyes rimmed red, “W-What?”

Coco kept a firm hold on Weiss’ wrist, confirming that Weiss had a pulse, albeit a scarily faint one, “She’s still with us, but just barely hanging on. We need to get her help, *now*.”

Ruby stared at Coco for another moment, before she looked down at Weiss. She moved her knuckles under her nose, feeling the faint in and out of air on her skin. Her eyes widened. Weiss- They weren’t too late. Not yet. “Then we’re leaving. You’ll have to cover me.” She reached up and undid the clasps holding her cape on her shoulders. She carefully wrapped Weiss in its warmth, before reaching for her scythe and clipping it to her back.

“H-Hold on Weiss-” Ruby whispered, bundling Weiss’ body carefully and standing back up, making sure Weiss was- or at least looked comfortable in her arms. “We’ll get you out of here. You’ll be fine, just stay with me, okay?”

There was no response.

Ruby took a weak breath, nodding to Coco, who went ahead at the signal. The older girl grabbed her purse as she passed it, unfurling the giant weapon as she led Ruby and Weiss back out of Weiss’ cursed cell. Ruby briefly glanced to the slouched faunus that Coco had tied to a pole nearby and frowned slightly. He’d done everything they’d asked; it felt wrong to leave him behind. He was a hostage too, no matter what they did to her partner.

Suddenly, an alarm began to blare, red lights flashing above their heads. Ruby almost jumped out of her skin, realisation hitting her as she finally noticed what looked like an anklet around Weiss’ ankle with a red flashing light. She furrowed her brows, falling gently into a crouch and prying her fingers underneath the flimsy leather. She yanked with all her might, only to let go with a hiss after a few seconds as the fabric cut into her fingers.

“Great, she’s got an electronic tag!” grumbled Coco, looking around frantically as she began to hear the distressed voices of White Fang around them. Ruby’s breath grew quick, looking to Coco for some sort of guidance.

“Then what do we do?”

“We need to get it off her somehow,” Coco answered, “But we can’t stay here. Let’s go, before we’re cornered.”

“Right.” hastily agreed Ruby, rising back onto her feet. How could she have been so stupid? She should’ve known to watch out for something like that! She watched police movies all the time as a kid, and hostages *always* had some kind of tracker on them. Stupid, *stupid*!

“Ruby, come on!” Coco called again, having reached the end of the hall. Ruby nodded to herself, glancing down to Weiss’ face again before moving to follow after Coco. The feeling of Weiss’ head gently laying against her chest gave her motivation, but fear quickly trailed along with it. She was holding Weiss’ life in her own hands, literally and figuratively. If she didn’t get out, not only was she dying, but she was bringing a leader from another team *and* her best friend with her. She couldn’t afford to be slow. Not when her partner’s life was on the line.

Ruby and Coco ran through several halls, their heavy footsteps clanging off the metal flooring below them. The red lights and blaring were quickly forming a headache in the back of Ruby’s head; her eyes were starting to burn. They passed dozens of glass cages, but neither girl looked inside them, too distracted with trying to escape to care. Ruby could feel Weiss moving ever so slightly in her grasp, sometimes accompanied by quiet breaths or whimpers at the unwelcome movements across her body.

A yell echoed from somewhere behind them, prompting Ruby to quickly glance back to find the owner of said voice. A scientist was pressed back against a railing in fear as a black body pressed itself against the glass from inside a cracked glass cage, too far for Ruby to tell what kind of Grimm it was. The man was frozen stiff, almost in a trance.

“Oof-” Ruby coughed as she bumped into Coco’s back, staggering back a step.

Coco had stopped still, her weapon poised directly ahead of her. Ruby’s skin pricked as she stepped to look past her. Fury boiled through her veins as Torchwick stared back. “*You.*”

“Hello, Little Red.” said Torchwick, leaning against his cane. Behind him was a small group of White Fang soldiers, each wearing their own expression of smugness and victory. He leaned slightly, noticing Weiss bundled in Ruby’s arms. “I see you’re playing hero again. I think that’s mine, actually. Could I have her back?”

Ruby grit her teeth painfully tight, grinding her heel into the ground as a dark shadow covered her eyes. Coco’s hand moved in front of her, stopping her from advancing if she tried to.

“Roman Torchwick, you are under arrest for murder, theft, kidnapping and experimentation, along with a long list of other offences. Surrender peacefully or I will have to resort to less pleasant means to apprehend you!” Coco

threatened, cocking her heavy machine gun in her grasp. Torchwick laughed, looking at his backup before returning his attention to the leader of team CFVY.

“You are in no position to give orders here, little girl.” Roman teased, before nodding to Weiss again, “Now, if you don’t mind, I’ll be taking my specimen and leaving before the boys in blue get here.”

Ruby held Weiss closer, muttering quietly below her breath, “*Do not* call her a specimen.”

“Or what, Red?” Ruby hesitated as Roman began to laugh, looking to his wrist before removing his cap and bowing slightly. “Now, I must take my leave. Perry, make sure you bring me the Schnee *alive*, or else *you* won’t be.”

The muscled Faunus beside him grunted, lifting a heavy looking gun sword from his back and aiming it at the trio ahead of him. The array of smaller grunts followed suit, pulling out cheap weapons from their sides. Coco tensed, while Ruby carefully set Weiss against one of the railings. She couldn’t leave Coco to fight these guys alone, but she could keep an eye on Weiss too if she supported Coco with ranged attacks.

She gently left Weiss against the rail, pulling the warm fabric of the cloak to cover the exposed parts of Weiss’ skin. She placed a hand to Weiss’ cheek for a moment, relieved to feel heat seeping back into her skin. “Wait here, okay? I’ll be back in a second. Promise.”

“Again with the promises you can’t keep, Red? I thought you learned your lesson last time.” Torchwick mocked as he melded back into the crowd of faunus, white coat and red hair disappearing from view. Coco bit her lip, loading in a round of her high impact dust as she prepared for the fight. Ruby joined beside her, unfurling Crescent Rose into its sniper mode.

“I’ll take the big guy.” Ruby said, meeting the brute’s piercing gaze.

“I’ll take the rest, then.” Coco said.

There was a heartbeat of stillness before the ambush rushed towards the two huntresses, weapons drawn. All hell broke loose, gunshots and aura blasts being exchanged. Ruby sucked in a nervous breath before unloading paralyzing Dust rounds into the oncoming wave, wincing at the sheer amount of noise that attacked her ears.

Weiss could hear something loud... dreadfully, *painfully* loud. The piercing noise dragged her from the abyss of her own tormented mind. 'Stop,' she cringed as her body began to wake up, trying to hold onto the warm darkness that had numbed her body, 'I don't want to wake up'. The darkness didn't listen to her pleas for death, the numbness slipping from her grasp and replaced by the sight of dull, flashing lights around her. She shifted slightly, expecting the painful pulling sensation of her heavy body on her shoulders to return... Except it didn't, and neither did the tight pressure and pinching around her bruised wrists. Her body was still in a lot of pain, horribly, sickly so, but the pulling sensation was gone. She was on the ground, her skin brushing against something cool and damp beneath her. The stagnant air and coldness of her cell was gone, replaced with a warm comforting feeling around her and... and the scent of *roses*.

The heiress took in a heavy, painful breath, flourishing in the warm, sweet scent of flowers, confused for a moment. She dug the tips of her fingers into the cape that enclosed her body, gripping onto the old fabric as a sense of dull awareness slowly returned. The way the fabric balled in her fingers, and the suffocating warmth that was enough to warm even the icy depths of her soul, felt familiar. She took another breath of rose scented air, holding it inside her lungs as she triple checked that this was real. That all of this was real. There was only one person on Remnant that Weiss knew, who wore such an old, suffocatingly warm, flowery smelling cloak. She tried to speak, finding her throat to be drier than Vacuo's deserted lands. The word came out in two dry halves, requiring a heavy breath between both of them.

"Ru...by...?"

Ruby's heart skipped a beat as a bullet grazed over her shoulder, glancing back to make sure the rogue shot hadn't hit her vulnerable partner in the crossfire. Her head whipped around in panic, just in time to witness Weiss' pale lips barely moving on her face, her voice inaudible over the racket of the fight around her. For a moment she wasn't even sure if she saw it, but her eyes stayed on her partner's previously limp form. They widened as she witnessed Weiss stirring, fingers grasped tightly around Ruby's cape as she took heavy, laboured breaths that moved her entire frame. Tears jumped to Ruby's eyes at the sight, suddenly unaware of the giant White Fang Lieutenant behind her. Weiss and Ruby locked eyes for a beat, the younger huntress unaware of the looming threat.

Her eyes were open, the world spinning her blurry, dim vision like an ocean, churning her body around on its relentless waves, in its merciless attempt to kill what was left. She weakly gripped her fingers around the worn fabric for some kind of stabilizer, lifting her head in search of the owner of the garment. Her eyes found her not too far away from her, staring down at Weiss like she'd seen a ghost reanimate the dead. Weiss supposed that's what she must've looked like, nothing but a ghost of what she once was. Shame pinned her chest for the moment they locked eyes, hoping that maybe, maybe this wasn't just another dream. That she wouldn't wake up back in those chains, waiting to be called on for another match. Then Weiss noticed a tall, overarching shadow growing above her partner, a heavy sword lifted over its head and aimed at her distracted teammate. She tried to move instinctually, but her legs wouldn't budge, heavy, as if they were made of nothing but lead. *Ruby, turn around!* Weiss screamed desperately in her head, trying to claw her way out of the depths of fear that had claimed her being. *Move!*

Panic sunk into Weiss' heart, a familiar cold numbness bursting across her figure as she finally found what remained of her broken voice. She screamed, louder, and more raw, then she had ever done in her life.

“*RUBY!*”

For a second, all Ruby saw was blue.

She let out a pained yelp as something sharp tore across her face, dealing the final blow to her aura and tearing her skin with a single slash. She recoiled back, staggering into a nearby railing blindly and pressing a hand to the side of her face. A warm, soupy feeling met her fingertips, collecting on her hand as whatever wound she'd just received bled freely. She hissed, rubbing her eye with the palm of her hand in an attempt to clear her stained vision. She forced her eye open, red tinted vision meeting her. The wound must've only just missed her eye, she realised in relief. Any closer and she would've gone blind. She gently pressed her fingers to her cheek, finding a painful, deep, long slice cut into her skin. Her own blood fell from it and splattered on the ground, staining her neck and her dress collar.

What had even hit her?

“What the...?” Coco murmured, prompting Ruby to look back to where their opponents were, or had been. Instead of a mini-army facing them with their weapons drawn, a tall wall of thick, crystal blue ice had sprouted out of

seemingly nowhere. The metal flooring was torn in half along with one of the displays having shattered into dust. Ruby's eyes widened, albeit painfully, at the sight. "Is that... Ice?" Coco continued.

Ruby had no words as she tried to figure out what she was looking at, the temporary shock leaving her speechless. That's when she picked up on the sound of heavy breathing mixed with confused sobs emanating from behind her. Both huntresses turned to look at Weiss, who was staring at the wall of ice with an expression similar to her two companions. Tiny, blue crystals growing on the surface of Weiss' hands, which were shaking as she tried to hold Ruby's cloak around her.

Coco took a nervous step back, glancing across to Ruby in unease, finally noticing the long wound on her face, "Ruby! Are you okay?"

Ruby ignored her, falling to her knees in front of Weiss while the ivory haired girl struggled to comprehend what was going on. Tears were sitting in Weiss' eyes, her breathing quickening with every breath she took. Puffs of frozen moisture left her lips in a small cloud each time she breathed out; the same type of mist you'd see on a cold winter day.

Ruby reached out to grab a hold of Weiss' shaking hands, taking her delicate, cold fingers and holding them tightly in Ruby's warm grip as she shook. Weiss flinched at the touch, a scared whimper escaping her.

"Weiss- Weiss, *breathe*." Ruby said softly, rubbing her thumbs off the back of her partner's soft hands. She felt Weiss' fingertips dig into Ruby's hand for a moment, followed by something sharp forming beneath Ruby's fingers. "Weiss?"

"I.. I didn't-" She croaked before cringing in pain, arms clutching at her ribs. The tears that had been forming in her eyes fell, leaving damp spots on Ruby's cloak. They landed beside two growing blood stains near her shoulder. Ruby was sure they weren't there earlier. She frowned worriedly, tightening her grip.

"Hey- Hey, it's okay. Can you walk?" Ruby asked, eager to get out of the twisting tunnels of the laboratory before anything else like this happened. She could hear Grimm starting to become restless, throwing themselves into their glass cages, attempting to escape. Ruby hadn't even checked whether or not the cage that Weiss had smashed held any Grimm inside it. Weiss finally shook her head slowly, gulping down a lump in her throat as she tried to recollect herself. Ruby did the same. "Then I'm going to pick you up, okay?"

Weiss nodded again, whining slightly as Ruby reached beneath her and scooped her form into her arms. She winced at the uncomfortable feeling radiating across her body, before falling limp again and falling against her

rescuer's chest. Her world was spinning again, the black pinholes across her vision threatening to swallow her whole as adrenaline pumped out of her body.

"Ruby... are you... real?" Weiss asked quietly. Ruby frowned slightly in confusion, nodding for Coco to lead the way. The leader of CFVY spared another glance to the wall of ice, before folding up her gun and rushing ahead of Ruby and Weiss in the only remaining route out. Ruby shuffled her hold slightly, before gently moving into a jog behind Coco.

"I... Uh, yeah? Of course I'm real." answered Ruby, clumsily using her shoulder to wipe a fresh layer of blood from her jaw. *Why would she ask that?* Weiss' half-closed eyes faintly followed Ruby's movement, a shaking hand appearing from below Ruby's cloak to hover by the cut on her partner's face. She held it there for a moment, cool skin pressed against warm, almost as if she was proving that Ruby was physically there. She brushed her thumb across Ruby's cheek. Horror flashed across her face as she felt something wet brush against the side of her thumb, pulling her fingers back upon feeling the wetness on their tips and staring at them. She slowly registered the crimson colour on her skin.

"You're bleeding..." she breathed, her pupils shrinking, "I- ...I hurt you..."

"Huh?" Ruby asked, before noticing Weiss staring at the bloody streak down Ruby's face and neck. She paled, "Oh! Oh this? No, you didn't do *this*. I was hit by a, uh, a bullet."

Weiss' eyes shrunk again. "I... I *hurt* you-"

Guilt sunk into Ruby's stomach as she realised her attempt at lying wasn't working. "N-no- Well, you didn't mean to. It was an accident-" Ruby quickly grinned, ignoring the sharp wince and sensation of cracking caked blood on her face, "I'm fine! It doesn't even hurt."

Weiss didn't respond this time, tucking her arm back into the warmth of Ruby's cloak and staring into space. Ruby bit the back of her lip, looking around her as Coco turned another corner. She could hear glass smashing, followed by long, drawn out howls of Grimm as they escaped their confines.

"We have company!" Ruby heard Coco yell, followed by the sound of her mingun shooting. She heard the piercing screams of Grimm as they died just before Ruby turned the corner, witnessing as they turned to sooty ash. Coco was out of breath, as was Ruby, but they were almost out. Ruby recognised the gouges out of the floor from when they'd first entered the tunnels.

“We’re almost there.” Ruby muttered to Coco as she passed her, leading the way to the end of the hallway. “The entrance was just over here!”

As Ruby spun around the corner, she heard a loud scream to her left. She stepped back, her eyes landing on a Grimm she hadn’t been expecting to see.

A Nuckleave.

Ruby heard Weiss gasp, drawing Ruby’s glance once more. Weiss watched it with a strange look of familiarity, her entire body stone solid as she took in the sight. Fear pooled in Ruby’s own gut at the strange look, answered by the loud cry of the Nuckleave opposite her.

“Weiss?” Ruby asked. Weiss flinched, but her eyes were still hooked on the Grimm opposite her.

“It’s her.”

Ruby frowned in confusion, looking up as Coco appeared and yelped a colourful word at the sight of the Nuckleave. The Grimm... Was hesitating? It was almost like Weiss and it were in a world of their own.

“It’s who?”

“...Marion.”

“*Who?*” Ruby repeated, jumping back with a yelp as a fireball launched over the Nuckleaves shoulder and caught fire to one of the electricity circuits beside her. She hissed as sparks erupted, turning her shoulder to protect her injured partner from the blaze. Coco also winced, grabbing Ruby by the shoulder and nodding ahead.

“The exit! Let’s go!” She ordered, pushing Ruby towards the door they’d first entered through. Ruby gulped, turning her back to the Nuckleave and cautiously activating her semblance, pulling Coco in with her and shooting them forward and through the door. Ruby winced, her entire body exhausting instantly at the unaccustomed weight of

the other two women. She fell to the floor, rose petals scattering everywhere as she curled herself protectively around Weiss. She cried as she fell against her sore shoulder, sliding to a stop by the feet of Velvet and Yatsunashi.

“Ruby! Weiss!” Velvet yelled in surprise, crouching down to help her back up. Ruby groaned, carefully sitting back up to check on Weiss again. The heiress had returned to her unconscious state, her face pressed against Ruby’s chest. Panic flashed across Ruby for a moment, prompting her to check Weiss’ pulse below her jaw. A slow, sporadic beat met her fingertips, Ruby sighed in relief.

Yatsunashi had helped Coco to her feet by the time Ruby recovered, the door they’d only just come through starting to pour Grimm free. Coco and Yatsu took to fighting them off defensively, as Grimm Ruby had never even seen before began to crawl forward, screaming and clawing hungrily at the small group of scared teenagers. Ruby had to fight.

“Velvet, take care of Weiss!” Ruby ordered, gently passing her partner to Velvet, who was crouched beside her. The rabbit faunus nodded, carefully wrapping her arms around the Schnee’s fragile body. Her eyes widened in alarm at the state she was in, her rabbit ears pinning back.

Now that Ruby knew Weiss was in safe hands, she could finally let out all the pent up, raw emotion that had been building up inside her over the last few days. With a gruff sigh, she fully unfurled Crescent Rose from her back, holding it painfully, planning out a route of attack before blasting into the sea of black and bone in a tornado of rose petals.

For a moment, all she saw was black as she spun her blade, using the motion of her semblance to slice through thick flesh as she raced through the waves of Grimm that fled from the laboratories. She could hear screaming down the halls, joined with the chalky taste of smoke that lined the back of her throat and made it hard to breathe. She finished her sprint, spinning in a circle before kicking up and out of the sea of Grimm, now taking aim with her sniper. She caught a few bigger Beowolves in the head before she hit the ground, landing just in front of Coco and Yatsunashi. Gods, her shoulder hurt.

“They just keep coming!” Yatsu grumbled, hacking straight through the torso of a Sabyr as it leapt forward. The cat fell in two pieces, laying still for a moment before fading to black.

“Yeah, and if those weird hybrids reach us we’re all done for,” Coco finished, loading in another round of ammunition that she was quickly running out of. Ruby hummed in thought for a second.

“We need to block the door,” she called, spinning her scythe in her grasp as a Ravager flew for her face, severing its wing from its body and sending it straight into Coco’s range of fire.

“Any ideas on how?”

Ruby wasn’t sure. The only way they could really block the door was to bring the ceiling down again, or use some kind of Dust to seal it. The ceiling was already unstable from their previous encounter, Ruby knew that if they did it again the whole first floor would collapse on them. A lightbulb went off in her head, looking back to Weiss as memories of the giant ice wall that separated them from their attackers came to the forefront of her mind. She looked back to Coco, “I might have one. Cover me.”

Coco huffed, readjusting her grip as Ruby sprinted off. “I hope you know what you’re doing, because I don’t know how much ammo I have left for Gianduja.”

Ruby slid to her knees as she got closer to Weiss, her momentum carrying her to Velvet who sat there, holding her. The Faunus looked up as Ruby got near, before glancing down to Weiss again, who was barely even conscious.

“Weiss? Can you hear me?” Ruby asked quickly, wincing as a fireball from a manticores somewhere blasted over their heads. Weiss’ eyes grew bright for a moment, recognising the sound of Ruby’s voice, before letting her eyes droop down again. She heaved, her chest rattling as she fought through the hot agony coursing through her body. Ruby’s heart shattered watching Weiss writhe, knowing the heiress was probably trying to act much better than she felt. Velvet noticed too.

“She’s in bad shape, Ruby, she’s losing a lot of blood. She... She might not...” Velvet fell silent, knowing Ruby could figure out the rest. Ruby placed her knuckles to the side of her partner’s face, starting to notice the wet stained splotches on her own cape that stuck to Weiss’ body.

“She’ll make it- She... She has to-” Ruby said softly.

Ruby looked behind her as Coco and Yatsu were pushed closer, losing space between the sea of Grimm and the collapsed ceiling. Smoke filled at least half of the room now from the fire that raged below them, the heat of the fires making it hard to breathe. They were losing.

“Velvet!” Coco ordered, “I think it’s time for Anesidora.”

“Right!” Velvet responded, handing Weiss back to Ruby as carefully as she could and hopping to her feet. She joined her leader and pulled out her camera box, forming a sleek blue version of Coco’s own weapon in her hands and opening fire on the Grimm. Yatsu charged forward with Fulcrum in his grip, hacking and slashing through any Grimm that the Dust enhanced bullets wouldn’t get through.

Ruby watched as team CVY worked their magic, while she sat uselessly behind them with her unconscious partner in her hands. The way they worked together seamlessly was amazing, like they’d known each other their whole lives and could predict each other’s movements. The way Velvet and Yatsu lined up targets for each other, and how Coco’s semblance tore through weaker Grimm... If they hadn’t been in such a bad predicament, Ruby was positive that she would’ve been foaming in awe; seeing the best team in Beacon work like clockwork was inspiring.

Well, at least if they went down, they went down fighting.

“Get away from the ceiling.”

Ruby jumped as Fox’s voice suddenly echoed through her mind, scrambling to her feet as the heavy slab of concrete from the first floor began to glow black and shift in place. The heavy piece of concrete began to lift into the air like magic, quickly settling back into where it had been before the bomb had been set off. Ruby watched as the concrete fixed itself back into place in wonder, before looking behind where it had been.

Yang, Blake and Fox charged forward, stopping just before Ruby. “Whoa, that’s a lot of Grimm!” Yang commented quickly, cocking Ember Celica and sending two fire Dust propelled shotgun blasts into the blackness. Blake appeared by Ruby’s side, wild amber eyes checking over their team leader, and then down to Weiss.

“Is she..?” Blake asked, too nervous to finish the end of her sentence. Ruby shook her head.

“She’s alive, but she’s hurt really badly.” Ruby said. Yang glanced back down to her sister, and then to Weiss.

“What’s that thing on her ankle?” The blonde asked, turning and sending two more Dust powered shells into the Grimm as they backed off slightly. Ruby had almost forgotten.

“It’s a tracking tag.” Blake explained quickly, standing to swap out for Yang. “Yang, break it off!”

“Right!” Yang fell to one knee, prying her fingers under the thick black plastic and tugging. The material strained for a minute before shattering and falling to the floor in two pieces. She quickly hopped back onto her feet after that, turning to help her partner, “You need to get her out of here, Rubes. Don’t worry, we can cover you.”

Ruby’s mouth opened to object, but instead she jumped as a rough, yet familiar hand plopped on her head. She looked back in surprise to see a tall, raven haired man looking down at her with a mixed look of pride and relief. “*Uncle Qrow?!?*”

“You have no idea what kind of trouble you’re in!” came Glynda’s irritated voice, standing to the other side of Ruby and Blake. Ruby looked up in awe as the vice-headmaster brandished her crop, but she had a look Ruby’s didn’t recognise on her face. The older woman sighed upon seeing the horde of Grimm advancing on her already exhausted students. She pushed her glasses up her nose. “However, we will discuss the consequences to your actions later. Get outside, there’s an airship waiting for you.”

“And miss out on this? No way, I have to take my temper out on something, plus, I still gotta win against Qrow in *something*.” Yang hollered as Qrow and Glynda stepped forward. Qrow pulled his own sword from his back with a laugh, a glint in his eyes and a smirk on his scruffy face. His heavy buster sword suddenly started to shift, transforming into a scythe not too dissimilar from Ruby’s.

“Alright Firecracker. You’re on.” He looked back down to Ruby and nodded to Weiss in her grasp. “Just get her outta here, kid.”

Ruby took a breath, looking down to the pale, bloody form of her partner and back up to her newfound family. “Okay. You better come back.” She pivoted on her heel. Rose petals swirled around her feet as she charged her semblance, before bursting off with a rush of speed that splintered the floor beneath her. Ruby’s world became colours, using what she remembered of the entrance to lead herself out. As she passed through the lobby, she noticed several of Ironwood’s machines standing around with several more White Fang members arrested. The outside was no different, with Faunus sitting on their knees in chains in rows alongside the stolen Dust trucks.

It wasn’t hard to miss the giant, white airship that had landed in the clearing just beside the building, blue banners waving in the engine gusts as it sat in wait. Ruby stopped her semblance, sliding on her feet along the muddy ground. She stopped just by the main doors, clutching Weiss tight to her chest. The ivory haired woman in her hands groaned faintly, the colour that had briefly returned to her face quickly fading due to the sheer amount of blood she was losing.

“Help!” Ruby called into the airship, causing the doors to open. On the other side was someone Ruby had heard Weiss mention several times before, and who she could only assume to be Winter Schnee. She really looked like an

older version of Weiss, with sharper eyes and a battle hardened look in them. Despite that, Ruby could feel the emotion hit her aura like a train when she stepped out, sapphire blue eyes locked on the form of her younger sister.

Winter looked up to Ruby suddenly, urging the leader of RWBY to straighten her sore back a bit. “Ruby Rose?”

Ruby frowned in surprise. “You know my na-”

“Get in.” Winter ordered, hooking her hand under Ruby’s shoulder and pulling her up. Ruby winced at the pain that accompanied the gesture, but quickly scrambled into the side of the ship without a second word.

CHAPTER 11 (5.7k) (Posted)

Tick Tock

“Put her down there, quickly.”

Ruby didn’t hesitate, carefully laying Weiss’ frail form down onto what looked like a stretcher layered with a soft mattress and white sheets. She felt fear clawing at her throat as she tenderly laid Weiss’ arms beside her, the heiress limp and unresponsive to Ruby’s touch. She kept a tight grip on one of her frail hands, hoping, *willing*, that her partner would be strong enough to pull through this. The mere sight of Weiss’ body: bloody, bruised, pale and not moving in front of her, brought back that stubborn lump in her throat again, a shivering breath sneaking its way into Ruby’s lungs.

Winter returned a moment later, her sword gone and a thick black first aid box in her hands. The older woman looked down at her sister with a mixed look that Ruby could only faintly make out. She recognised the fear in her eyes, as she’d been staring at the same emotion in her own reflection a few hours earlier. The specialist carefully undid the cape clasps holding Ruby’s cape around Weiss’ neck, tugging the bloody fabric from under her and tossing it away.

“Will... she be okay?” Ruby asked hesitantly, her voice small while she watched Winter snap an oxygen mask around Weiss’ small face. Winter didn’t respond, instead she handed Ruby a bundle of heavy gauze and pointed to Weiss’ bleeding chest.

“Put pressure on her wounds, make sure to cover them as much as you can and don’t let go unless I tell you to.”

Ruby let go of Weiss’ limp hand with a small sigh and moved, pressing on the freely open scabs with a tender but firm touch. She could feel the rattled rise and fall of Weiss’ chest beneath the palms of her hands. Tears glistened in Ruby’s eyes. She couldn’t lose Weiss, so she focused on doing her job instead.

“Move to the side,” Winter ordered, peeling off the back of a cotton patch bandage. Ruby shuffled awkwardly to her left, feeling Winter’s aura brush off her own as she leaned in to cover the biggest area of scar tissue with a cotton bandage. Her aura was closed off, cold. “Stay with me, Weiss. I promise I won’t let you die.”

Weiss shifted faintly to the sound of her sister’s voice. Ruby wouldn’t even have noticed if she wasn’t still holding the clump of gauze to her chest.

Winter stood back, mindlessly wiping blood from her hands off onto her pristine white coat as she paced to the other side of the bed. Ruby watched her wipe something from her eyes, a frown settling on her face, before looking back down to Weiss’ face. That’s when she noticed her own hands were smeared in blood- wait, so was her dress. She hadn’t even noticed it until now-

“What did they do to my sister?” Winter asked, her voice cracking, fully drawing Ruby’s attention back to her. She shook her head.

“I- I don’t know.”

“Then who is responsible?” Her voice was a growl, as if she was threatening Torchwick’s very existence before even knowing it was him.

“Roman” Ruby mumbled. “Torchwick. That girl was there too.” Ruby was too. She let Weiss get caught in the first place...

“Neopolitan.” Winter snarled, looking up from what seemed to be Weiss’ vitals on her scroll. Her fingers were white with the viscous force of her grip, her striking blue eyes locked on her own sword she’d rested not too far away. “*Bastards*- I’ll have them executed by my own hand if it’s the last thing I do-”

“They’re gone.” Ruby said, looking down to Weiss as her breathing started to grow shallower, but stabler. Ruby reached down for her cape and laid it over Weiss’ bruised, shivering body like a blanket. She used the back of her hand to wipe tears from her own eyes. “They escaped when the Grimm broke free.”

“Then I’ll have them hunted like pigs-” Winter growled, watching as Ruby tenderly brushed her knuckles off Weiss’ soft cheek. She took a heavy breath. “Weiss needs emergency assistance. Where is the rest of your team?”

“Still inside.” Ruby gestured to the crumbling, burning laboratory. “Fighting Grimm.”

“Why are you not providing aid?” Winter prodded.

Ruby laughed weakly, holding her pained shoulder close to her body. Yang and Blake could handle themselves in a situation like this, especially with the help of CFVY, Qrow, and Glynda. Ruby would only be a burden. She couldn’t even hold Crescent Rose anymore, and her right eye was starting to swell from the bloody slice beneath it. “I’d only hold them back. I can’t even hold my weapon right now.”

Winter’s eyes flickered to Ruby’s shoulder, where her hand was gently massaging some of the pain away. She had some aura left, but not nearly enough to heal whatever damage she had done. She could only keep the pain at bay. Winter hummed, stepping closer and kneeling to take a closer look at Ruby’s shoulder. Ruby flushed, a surprised look in her eyes as Winter explored her shoulder, her touch strangely familiar to Weiss’. She squeezed-

“*OW*-” Ruby yelped, tugging herself away from Winter as white hot agony shot through her, “Ow-ow-ow-owww.”

“You’ve torn your labrum.” Winter explained flatly.

“Is that bad?” Ruby asked, holding her own shoulder protectively. Winter stood back up, nodding to the watching pilot before turning back to Ruby. The reaper heard the ship’s engines start up.

“You might require further surgery to fix it.” She said, straightening her posture and wrapping her hands behind her back as she turned and headed back to the airship’s cockpit. “I recommend you avoid moving your shoulder, lest you make it worse. There’s a sling in the first aid equipment. Use it.”

“Wait, what about my team?” Ruby asked as the airship got louder, the engines getting louder as they powered up fully, “We’re just gonna... leave them behind?”

“Are any of your other team members injured?” Winter asked.

Ruby frowned, “Not-”

“Then we are leaving. We don’t have time to wait for them.” Her voice was stern, demanding. Winter looked back at Weiss, a concerned look slipping past her guarded expression for only a moment. “Weiss is in a critical condition, and *you* are incapable of battle. The longer we wait, the less time we have to save her.”

Ruby’s heart pained with guilt. She looked back at Weiss, watching the frail rise and fall of her chest, the faint fogging of the oxygen mask over her face as Weiss’ parted, bloody lips took in and let out breath. Her ghostly skin was a blinding contrast to her usual flawless complexion against the bright red of her own blood. Winter was right, they didn’t have enough time to wait. Ruby had already caused enough damage. She took a tight breath, reaching for her muddy scroll in her pocket. “I’ll- I’ll let them know.”

“Good.” Winter said, nodding to the open first aid kit as she turned back to the cockpit. “Call if anything happens to Weiss, Miss Rose.”

Ruby glanced to the first aid box, finally becoming aware of the painful grinding sensation that accompanied every move of her shoulder. She winced, reaching for the sling and awkwardly unwrapping it with one hand. A few minutes of fiddling around with her free hand and using her teeth for leverage, and she had the sling on and around her neck.

Ruby let out a sigh of frustration as she moved her injured arm into the sling and relaxed it, the deep throbbing in her shoulder growing more and more prominent as adrenaline slowly fizzled out of her. Here she was, leader of an unauthorized mission, injured, out of battle with a... ripped... shoulder thing, while her team and the team she dragged into this tried to fix her mess.

Another deep sigh left her as she sat down beside Weiss, eyes lingering on her unresponsive partner for a moment before looking down to the scroll in her hand. She was shaking, the background picture of Weiss and her at Ruby's birthday staring back at her. Ruby was grinning widely, arm wrapped around Weiss' neck as she pulled her into a hug. Weiss was smiling back shyly, eyes watching Ruby.

Drip. Drip.

Ruby took a shuddering breath, resting her eyes in her hand as tears fell from them. This wasn't fair, none of this was. Weiss didn't deserve to be here, dying. Her team didn't deserve to be here, suffering for her mistakes, team CFVY didn't deserve to be here, no doubt getting in trouble for *Ruby's* mistakes. They should've waited, they should've just done as they were told and left it to the huntsmen-

What if Glynda and Uncle Qrow hadn't gotten there in time?

Ruby took a deep breath, pinching the tears from her eyes. Okay Ruby. Just- breathe. You can get through this. You've gotten over worse.

"What do I do, Weiss?" she hummed, looking up to her partner and grabbing her hand hoping for a response, but none came. "Normally you yell at me or- or call me a dunce until I come up with a plan on what to do- but.. but now you're.. And it's all my fault."

She stopped, taking a breath to collect her scattered thoughts.

"Again with the promises you can't keep, Red? I thought you learned your lesson last time."

Tears fell freely down Ruby's face as she sobbed, guilt crushing her beneath its heavy weight.

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BIG SIS <3 (ONLINE)

COOKIE MONSTER 16:53

‘Weiss’ big sis is bringing us to Vale Regional Hospital. She said we dont have time to wait for you. Sorry ;(‘

BIG SIS <3 16:59

‘No worriez sis! Make sure your gf is safe’

COOKIE MONSTER 18:52

‘Weiss is in emergency surgery. I’m in Room 653. Will give details when you get here’

BIG SIS <3 19:36

‘Just leaving Beacon. Glynda isn’t happy with us. Be there soon’

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Yang jogged through the main doors of Vale’s Regional Hospital as they opened up, Blake tailing close behind her. The two of them were covered in caked mud and stank of smoke, their hair frazzled from their long hours of fighting Grimm hordes. Several people parted out of the way at the sight of the two clearly battle worn huntresses, murmuring quietly as they left. They got some suspicious glances from other patients too, clearly surprised at the sudden appearance of dirty and scuffed huntresses. A child gasping in awe and pulled at their parents arm, whispering ‘Look, look!’ to which Blake waved shyly to the young girl.

“Hi, uh-” Yang took a breath, steadying her breathing as she reached the reception desk. “Ruby Rose? She said she was in room 65-something?”

The receptionist looked just as surprised as anyone else who’d seen them, her nose scrunching slightly. She put on a pair of glasses, “Are you a guardian?”

“We’re her teammates. We’re huntresses-in-training from Beacon.” Yang explained hurriedly, her fingers turning white as she gripped the edge of the counter with them. “I’m Ruby’s sister. Her father is in Patch.”

“And her mother?”

“Dead.”

“Oh, I apologise.” The blonde girl looked back to her screen, before lifting up a tablet beside her. It had Ruby’s credentials on it, as well as a whole bunch of other medical stuff Yang wasn’t interested in, like her blood type and her aura strength. The receptionist handed out a digital pen, “Considering you’re her only family present at the moment, I’ll need you to sign this form, confirming you are her sister. Payment has been covered by the Atlesian army, so you need not worry about the second line.”

Yang took the pen and began scribbling down quickly. Blake looked past her blonde partner. “The army covered it?”

The receptionist looked down behind the chestnut desk, searching a screen for an answer to Blake’s question. “Yes, it says here that *‘all funds for the hospitalization and care of Miss W. Schnee and Miss R. Rose will be covered by the Atlesian Army’*. Was this a mistake?”

“No! No, not at all. Just a little surprising.” Blake replied as Yang handed the tablet back.

The blonde woman took the device back, checking the signature. Then, she turned back to the monitor beside her. “Ruby Rose... She’s in Room 653. Physiotherapy ward, sixth floor.”

Yang and Blake crossed glances.

“Thank you.” Yang muttered, turning and heading towards the nearest elevator.

“She was hurt and she never told us-” Yang grumbled as she walked through the halls. “Why wouldn’t she tell us?”

“Her priority was Weiss.” Blake said. “She wasn’t thinking straight.”

“I don’t think Ruby *can* think straight.” Yang joked in an attempt to lighten the suffocating atmosphere between them, only earning a disapproving glare from her partner. “Too soon, gotcha.” Blake’s soft laugh made her heart tighten, her own smile blooming on her face.

She glanced back at her scroll, to the chat log between her and her sister. “Do you think she’s okay?”

“Weiss?”

“Yeah.”

Blake’s ears folded down, a worried look in her eyes. “I don’t know...” she said with a shake of her head. “She didn’t look like she was... and Ruby’s cloak....”

“I know what you mean.” Yang sighed, looking up as they finally found an elevator “I thought I’d break her when I had to break that anklet off. She felt really light, y’know, lighter than usual. There was no aura there either.” She pressed the call button to call the elevator.

“Knowing the White Fang, she probably hasn’t eaten anything all week- Her aura’s probably been trying to save her from starvation, not exterior attacks.” Blake’s ears fell back under her bow, “I’m surprised they didn’t kill her straight away.”

“Maybe the Fang changed their ways? From murderers to... scientists?” Yang tried, stepping into the elevator as it opened.

“The White Fang were never this cruel. They were never murderers. Ada- Their *leader* wasn’t- back when I was in the White Fang, they never would’ve done *this*. This isn’t the White Fang I grew up around. They used to be kind, peaceful.” Blake continued, the sadness in her voice clawing a painful wound across Yang’s heart. “They’re not all bad people, they’re just.. confused...”

“Well,” Yang cooed before she curled an arm around her feline partner, a warm smile on her face, “It doesn’t matter who you were, Blake, as long as you keep moving forward. I don’t care that you were a,” she lowered her voice, “I don’t care that you were one of them, because what matters is who you’ve become. If we were judged on our past, I’m pretty sure I’d be wanted in, like, 2 towns.”

“I can’t run from it forever.” Blake huffed. Yang squeezed her tighter, before patting her head right between Blake’s feline ears.

“Well, whenever it does catch up, *if* it does ever catch up, I’ll be right there to help. Promise.”

Blake stared at Yang in surprise for a long moment, a frail purr sounding from the depths of her throat as Yang’s fingers brushed off the fabric touching her ears. Yang’s eyes widened suddenly at the new sound, a hearty laugh escaping her as Blake turned red. The faunus scrambled back and out of Yang’s embrace, face flushed. “Sorry! I didn’t mean to do that! It just happens sometimes!”

“Uh-huh. If you had an ear fetish you should’ve just told me.” Yang teased, resting her hands on her hips. Blake’s face went a shade darker. “I’m only teasing, but I like your purr, Blakey. You should do it more.” Yang said, sticking out her tongue as the doors to the sixth floor opened. Blake flushed, her bow twitching again.

The hall was a purple theme, with lavender painted walls and the word ‘PHYSIOTHERAPY’ plastered to the wall in big bold letters. There were a few empty beds lining the halls, with hand rails and arrows painted on the floor leading to separate areas. There were a few nurses dotted around, some helping patients walk and others alone.

“Cheery.” Yang said, looking at the door numbers as they passed them.

“Yeah” Blake said back, looking around curiously. A young Faunus wobbled past on crutches, balancing weakly on one leg. He smiled at Blake as she let him pass, his own similar feline ears pointing up. Blake smiled back, trying to ignore the SDC brand on his forearm.

“650.. 652.. Here it is.” Yang said, stopping by one of the many uniform white doors. She pressed her hand to it, knocking a few times before pushing the door open. “Ruby?”

Ruby looked up from her bed as Yang pushed the door open, a nervous look in her eyes. Ruby forced a smile at her, “Heya, Yang.”

She sat up slowly, wincing at the uncomfortable stiffness in her shoulder as she moved. The numbing block the doctors had placed under it slipped down slightly, much to Ruby’s frustration. She grumbled, reaching around to try and push it up, “Stupid- magic-”

“Here, let me,” Yang said, jogging to Ruby’s bedside. Ruby huffed slightly as Yang moved the squishy foam block back behind Ruby’s shoulder, allowing the leader to lean back into her bed again. Yang leaned back slightly in a laugh once the block was secure, “Jeez, you look rough. What happened? Your face...”

“Uh, I tore something in my shoulder when the roof collapsed.” Ruby explained, scratching the back of her head with her good arm. “I kinda made it worse by ignoring it, but I’m fine. I already had surgery to fix it so- oh! And the doctors said my face will probably scar a little but at least Weiss and I-”

“Wait, wait, wait, *wait*.” Yang waved her arms, overwhelmed, “*You were in surgery?!?*” Yang bellowed, loud.

“Yang, we’re in a hospital!” Blake said sharply. “Lower your voice.”

“Sorry!” Yang glanced back at Blake, before returning to her sister. “*You were in surgery??*” she whispered harshly. Ruby giggled, catching a piece of loose hair and tucking it behind her ear.

“Yeah, but I’m okay! I was in and out in an hour. ...They gave me aura boosters and some really, *really* strong painkillers. Like, I’m pretty sure I’m kinda high off them, *oh*, and this block! It’s like magic, it makes the pain go away just by lying against it. The doctors said I should be able to start training again in two weeks if everything heals okay.”

“And your face?”

Ruby laughed nervously, reaching up to brush the cotton patch plastered tight against her face with the back of her hand, “Only a few stitches. I’m *okay* sis, promise.”

Yang’s bottom lip quivered slightly before she pounced on Ruby, wrapping her arms around Ruby’s head and pulling it into her chest as she let out a pent up sigh, “Thank the gods, it’s nothing too serious. When Glynda told us you we’re in hospital I-”

“Yang-” Ruby protested, trying to wriggle free from her sister's painfully crushing hug. “The shoulder- it still hurts-”

Yang let go immediately, bolting back with her arms in the air as if she'd just scalded her sister. “Oh, shit, sorry!”

Ruby's eyes widened as a gasp broke from her. “You swore!”

Blake laughed quietly at the two siblings' antics, seated on the opposite side of the bed. It was good to see Ruby’s bubbly spirit back. She really was the spirit of the team, and without her playful innocence team RWBY just felt empty, a husk of it’s past self. Her smile faltered, the missing member of their team nagging at the front of Blake's mind like a thorn. "Is there any news on...?"

Ruby's giggles died out suddenly, like a flame in water. Her eyes widened briefly before growing dark and foggy, the playful spark that had been there only seconds before, snuffed out. She shook her head silently, before adding: "Her... her heart had stopped by the time we landed..."

Horror crossed both of her teammates' faces, while Ruby just stared down at her hands balling the sheets in her grip. “I... Winter told me they managed to help her before... but...” Ruby sighed, grinding the palm of her hand into her tired eyes with a sniff. “I didn’t even get to see her. I’ve been stuck in this room since we got here. I-I don’t even know if Weiss managed to...” A shaky breath. “Pull through.”

After a long pause, Yang shuffled closer to her sister, slightly perturbed at the defeat that laced Ruby's words. Yang was hoping that the last few days hadn't completely shattered her younger sister's spirit. "Hey, she's in good hands." Yang managed to croak out, unsure how to even respond. "She'll be okay... I hope."

"Are you okay, Ruby?" Blake asked. "I can't even imagine how this must feel for you."

Ruby huffed quietly. "I'm tired, and sore." She took a breath, straightening herself again. "But I'm fine."

Ruby was lying again. She hadn't felt this bad since her mother had died. When she had found out that her mom was gone and not returning, she'd locked herself in her room in Patch and cried for days straight. Yang had been forced to sleep in the spare bedroom, and only ever allowed herself into Ruby's room to deliver some dinner, which was left uneaten for days. It was only when Yang returned on the 6th day, to Ruby almost skin and bones, clad in the same pajamas as the day the news came, that Yang finally did manage to snap her out of it. It took weeks for Ruby to get used to the newly present emptiness in their home, the lack of sweet smelling baked goods and the quietness that haunted the now lifeless halls. She knew that Weiss wasn't dead, or at least, she wasn't the last time Winter had given her updates.

But that was before Weiss went in to get some of the Dust in her system removed. The lack of updates scared Ruby, but what was worse than the unknown, was the terrifying, crushing guilt that claimed Ruby's soul like long thorned tendrils. She hadn't understood much of what the doctors had said when they jumped out of the airship with Weiss, but what she could hear was enough for her to think on in the crippling, lonely silence of her hospital room.

Chronic Dust poisoning.

Ruby had looked up the term on her scroll once she'd woken up from her own surgery. From what she managed to gather, it was a relatively rare occurrence. Usually, people who were hurt by Dust in some way either died on the spot, or were rushed fast enough to a hospital to only suffer mild poisoning. Chronic poisoning meant one thing. If Weiss did survive her injuries, and made a recovery, she'd still only have a few months at most to live before the Dust in her blood killed her. There was supposedly no cure, only the ability to slow it down.

But, if Roman Torchwick had poisoned Weiss like that, he had to know the cure. Maybe, at least, one of the scientists that were taking part in it did. Ruby swore on her own life, she would find a way to cure Weiss. If she didn't...

Ruby let out a raggedy breath, chasing away the dark, threatening thoughts from her mind. She met Yang's eyes, trying to shake off the pure worry that filled them. "What happened after we left?"

"In short?" Yang asked as she leaned back, getting a nod from Ruby. "Well, we kicked some Grimm butt, but the fire ended up going out of control so we had to retreat out of there. Some of the Grimm escaped, I think, so they're sending out some huntsmen to round them up and kill them. Pretty sure Ironwood's robots rounded up the scientists."

"What about team CFVY? And Uncle Qrow?" Ruby asked.

"We all went back to Beacon to be lectured by Glynda and Ozpin." said Blake. "Our teams have been banned from doing missions for the foreseeable future, and your uncle wasn't even invited to our rescue party. He just showed up according to Glynda."

Ruby frowned, throwing her arm in the air uselessly. "Aw man..."

"But hey, Professor Ozpin congratulated us on a semi- successful mission, and we weren't expelled!... Yet..." Yang said, a smile on her face. "Maybe we can convince old Oz to lessen our sentence."

"Maybe, but I doubt we'll be going on missions for a long time..." Blake nodded to Ruby's shoulder. "Half of our team is out of commission, for who knows how long."

"And the White Fang?" Ruby pitched again.

"Arrested, mostly." Yang sat back in her chair, arms folded comfortably over her chest. "Any who escaped unscathed, at least. Ironwood's bots did that. I'm pretty sure I broke that one guy's face."

"The police are going to search the remains of the fire after it's fully out." Blake finished. "Maybe they can find out what kind of experiments they were carrying out at the facility."

"Did... Were they doing anything to Weiss?" Yang asked tentatively. Ruby frowned.

“The scientist who led us to Weiss mentioned something...” Ruby narrowed her eyes, the images of blue ice shielding them from the army of White Fang that they were facing coming to her mind again. “And there was... this strange thing that happened, but... I don’t know. It could’ve been anything.”

“What happened?” Yang prodded, curious. Ruby sat back into her bed, a long sigh escaping her.

“Honestly? I don’t even know. Coco was there, she can probably explain it better than I can.” Ruby practically sank into the pillow as she leaned back. “Weiss- She did... something... Actually, I don’t even know if it was *her*. It could’ve just been a well timed accident... but there was no Dust even near us so how could-”

Yang glanced to Blake, who shuffled closer. “You’re not making a lot of sense, Ruby.”

“Yea, sis. You’re being kinda cryptic.” Yang added. Ruby chuckled awkwardly, rubbing at her neck where a phantom pain resided.

“It just sounds crazy when I say it out loud.” Ruby groaned as she shifted against her sore shoulder, “But I don’t actually know what happened.”

“What do you think happened?” Yang asked, concerned.

“Well-”

A knock interrupted Ruby’s voice, shushing her as the door to her room was pushed open. Yang and Blake tensed instinctually, their muscles bunching beneath their clothes as the urge to protect surged in them. On the other side was a very tired looking Winter Schnee, a look of surprise on her face as she was met with two clearly startled huntresses.

“Oh, Winter!” Ruby greeted, sitting up a little too quickly. She hissed in surprise as hot pain shot through her, her hand rushing to hold her shoulder. “Ow.”

“Good to see you are already in recovery, Miss Rose,” Winter said, closing the door behind her quietly. She still hadn’t changed out of her uniform, of which the once clear white and blue fabric was now soaked with dried blood.

“You’re Weiss’ sister?” Yang asked, relaxing slightly into her seat. Winter looked to her, and then to Blake. Yang tensed again as her eyes flickered to Blake’s bow.

“That is correct. I’m assuming you are the missing members of team RWBY?” Winter asked, locking her hands behind her back and standing up straight. Ruby straightened herself too, albeit clumsily.

“Yang, Blake, this is Winter.” She replied, introducing the two. “She’s Weiss’ big sister.”

“Pleasure to meet you both.” Winter nodded her head curtly, her eyes growing clouded. “I would’ve preferred it to be under better circumstances, however.”

“Any news on Weiss?” Blake asked, speaking her team’s thoughts aloud. Winter sighed in response, her shoulders sagging as her straight stance crumpled. No matter how tough she tried to appear, there were still some things that broke through her emotional barrier.

“She is... stable.” Winter started, watching as relief coursed through the room. “However, she is still gravely injured. There’s large amounts of purified Dust in her bloodstream, and if not treated quickly, she won’t last to see the Vytal Festival next year.”

The relief in the room died. Ruby felt her chest tighten. She’d heard correctly then. Weiss *did* have Dust poisoning. “Is.. is there any way to treat it?”

Winter hesitated, pressing her lips tightly together. Yang and Blake watched her with a faint look of desperation, and fear. They couldn’t lose a member of their team, not after all that they’d gone through to save her.

“She’s... We found a large collection of samples in the remains of the fire. We are currently testing each substance with Weiss’ blood to see if there is any that can nullify the effects of their... experimenting.” Winter took a breath, her shoulders repositioning and straightening themselves again. “I don’t believe Torchwick and his associates would have done such horrendous experiments without a cure, especially considering Miss Rose and Miss Adele’s testimonies.”

“Well, if there’s no cure, can’t you, I don’t know, reverse engineer one or something?” Yang asked.

“No, purified Dust is very volatile.” Winter explained. “Any incorrect treatment inside or outside Weiss’ body could make it ignite. The blood samples we collected were done so using professional machinery.”

“What do you mean volatile?” Yang questioned.

“It’d activate.” Blake said, eyes downcast. “It’ll kill Weiss within a couple of seconds...”

“Affirmative.” Winter sighed. “Now, I’m afraid I must leave for official business. I’ll return in a few days to check on my sister. ...She’s not expected to wake for a long time, however....”

“Okay.” Ruby said, crestfallen. She sank further back into her pillow. “We’ll see you soon, then?”

“Yes, I hope so.” Winter forced a half smile, reaching back for the door. “I wish you a good recovery, Miss Rose.”

“Thank you.” Ruby said quietly as the door to the hospital room closed. The silence lingered for an uncomfortable minute. That minute turned to more minutes, then to half an hour.

“Now what..?” Yang asked after a long while, wringing her hands together as everyone was left with their own thoughts.

“Now, we wait.” Blake responded, taking a long breath. “Wait, and hope for the best.”

Hope? Ruby would have laughed. She was running low on hope.

“Ruby?” Yang’s voice broke through her wall of thoughts. She looked up.

“Sorry, I was just thinking...” She squeezed her eyes tightly, taking a breath and refreshing herself with fake energy from her reserve before letting it go with a reluctant sigh. She didn’t know if she could face herself and be proud of what she’d done after all of this, considering how she’d been to blame for allowing Weiss to be caught in the first place, but, she had to be happy- or at least appear so. If not for her, for the rest of her team. “It’s okay, we’ll get through this! We’ve gotten through worse, right?”

“That’s the spirit.” Blake hummed, the glow restored to Yang and her eyes. Ruby grinned, swallowing the lump in her throat. She couldn’t cry in front of her team. That’s not what a good leader did.

“Yeah, uh, hey.” Ruby placed a hand on her stomach. “I’m hungry. Did you guys pass a cafeteria on your way up? I’m running off energy bars right now.”

“I think so.” Yang said, standing from her seat and stretching with a grunt. “Let’s go get some grub. You’re not you when you’re hungry, and *man* am I starving!”

“Do you need any help, Ruby?” Blake asked as Ruby awkwardly untangled herself from her sheets. The redhead looked up guiltily, testing her feet as she stood back onto them.

“Nope! I’m good, just gotta take *this* with me.” She said, reaching out to grab her IV pole with her free hand. “Let’s get going.”

Chapter 12 (7.3k) (Posted.)

“Awakening”

Unconsciousness, it seemed, was similar to the sensation of having a warm blanket wrapped around you. You're warm and cozy, just to the point of not caring about anything that wasn't the maintenance of keeping yourself in that state. Weiss's limbs buzzed with the fuzziness, almost as if they weren't a part of her anymore. She couldn't feel the constant abuse and torture on her body from the last few days. Has it been a week? Weiss didn't know anymore. She'd lost the ability to keep track the first time she'd passed out. Pure nothingness surrounded her. Endless, silent and unwavering. It was addictive, holding Weiss within its merciful embrace and not letting go. If she was any more aware, she might've thought it similar to an obsession. No matter how much she struggled to get free (in a few attempts she had made, at least) she wouldn't get anywhere. She'd lose herself in the passing of time. A floating soul without a body, until finally the darkness took control of her, and she'd lose sense of who she was. She disappeared, and never returned.

She strangely favoured having no real senses; it was almost bliss. No pain, no fear, no worries or responsibilities. She didn't have to worry about the seemingly endless rage that her Father fueled, or the fears of letting her teammates down. Weiss greedily soaked in those ideas, desperate not to let go. She'd never felt this truly free before. She could lament on thoughts that had previously upset her, or shift through memories that she'd buried deep in her mind, not feel anything while watching them. She let her mind wander in limbo for as long as she wanted, until she saw fit to finally face whatever torment that awaits her. Sure, there were moments where her eyelids would flutter and her vision would fill with pure, blinding white or blue, like a thunderstrike in the night, or she'd feel a single pinch on her arm and hear a sourceless slow beat. Her body would flare in temperature too, from a constant, stabbing veil of ice on her shoulders to an almost unbearable inferno that coursed through every vein in her body like molten lava, but it had been nothing but the lonely, inky abyss for a long while now.

If anything, she would've been glad to stay in her warm, painless realm as long as she wanted. There was nothing worth waking up to, not as long as she remained in the White Fang's grasp. Their little "conversion" sessions left a lot to be desired, and although Weiss couldn't feel any pain, she did recognise the uncomfortable shifting in her chest, and the unnatural angle at which her wrist stuck out. She knew that the second she woke up, she'd be objected to the torture of her own body, the cold, writhing agony that accompanied every twitch and ripple of her muscles.

That annoying beeping was back again, too, returned from the unknown that it had faded to earlier. Weiss only wished she had a way to turn it off. It was as if it was waiting long enough for her to start to fall into the limbo of sleep only to start up again, like an alarm clock too far out of reach.

There was a foggy, dull light ahead of her, and blurry shadow-like specters surrounding it. The beeping was coming from there, Weiss realised, moving her lead-weighted body to move towards it. She found her footing beneath her suddenly, her knees buckling beneath the weight of herself as she lost the sense of weightlessness she'd grown to appreciate. She scrunched her eyes at the uncomfortable feeling in them as the fuzziness faded from her toes, replaced by relentless cramps that echoed through her calves. She forced herself to her feet, her fingers cramping after touching the flooring beneath her. Each heavy step she took, she got near to the light ahead of her and the nearer she got, the less blurry the world seemed. The weight of it almost became lighter as she reached out, the warm white glow enveloping the tips of her fingers. As soon as her skin brushed off its warmth, it rushed at her, swallowing her into a void of blurry sight.

Weiss closed her eyes in fright, burning at the sudden brightness that assaulted them. Her eyelids felt heavier than she remembered, weighed, closed and fighting against her as she tried to open them again. She could slowly feel her sensations returning to her. Her hearing, her sense of smell, her sense of touch-

Everything hurts.

Her body felt foreign to her, a heavy weight pinning her soul beneath it. A nauseous feeling filled her stomach as the pain returned, dull throbs racking her shoulders and back with long, sharp claws. Her joints feel stiff and sore, and the skin along her neck and down her torso feels tight and raw as it moved. She was all too aware of the rising and falling of her chest and how the scarred tissue moved with it. Strangely though, she felt calm, surrounded by a comfortable buzz and that ridiculous, annoying *beep beep beep* that came from somewhere beside her. She wanted it to stop, slightly shifting her hand.

Weiss hesitated.

Her wrists were free.

She thought for a minute. What had happened before she passed out? She tried to search the inky abyss she'd just escaped. Foggy images and dull voices originating from somewhere, but they were undecipherable and jumbled. No matter how much focus she tried to gather.

Listen to your surroundings, Weiss. Just like Marion told you.

“Hey, look!”

There was a shuffle. Clothing moving off itself, someone moving to look at her. An aura brushed off hers, warm and friendly. The beeping got faster, taunting.

“Is she waking up?”

Weiss bit the tip of her tongue lightly, noticing the familiar feeling of her aura around her, protecting her. It was like a comfortable shawl around her, fitted perfectly to her slimming body. She missed that familiar sensation.

“Weiss?”

“Weiss...” A hand landed on her chest, bloody. Weiss looked up, terror in her eyes as blood dripped onto her face. “Hey now, that look doesn’t suit you. Smile.”

Her eyes flew open in panic, her body following suit as she shot up with a harsh and painful gasp. Her hand clawed tightly at her chest, each breath she took only magnifying the agony that resided there. She was cold, *freezing* actually, her hair cascading down either side of her head and blocking out her view. She stared emptily down at her hands as she clutched at her chest, heaving, fingers curled tightly around the fabric. She could taste copper at the back of her throat, and the beep followed the increasing rate of her heart beat.

“Weiss?!” Soft hands landed on her shoulders, holding her tight as she swayed. Calloused thumbs pushed comfortingly into her shoulder blades as Weiss’s racing heart began to slow, each beat of the organ slowly easing the pain that coursed through her. She let out the breath she hadn’t realized she was holding, wincing as her shoulders moved with her. Her stomach churned, and she swallowed as watery saliva filled her mouth.

“Weiss- *Weiss!* Hey, listen, you need to *relax* or you’ll hurt yourself!”

Her world was spinning, the silvery waterfall of her own hair swirling and waving. She was struggling to catch her breath, each inhale cut short as agony assaulted her ribs. Her hand loosened on the fabric on her chest as she started to get her breathing under control, eyes watering beneath scrunched eyelids and furrowed brows.

Everything *hurts*. She wanted it to *stop*.

“Deep breaths, okay?” Another palm landed on her back, rubbing soothing circles at the base of her neck. “In and out, you can do this.”

Weiss nodded slightly, focusing on taking a long breath in and a short one out. She spluttered a few times upon her first few attempts, but finally after what felt like a lifetime, she finally grasped the hold of herself again, adrenaline burning out of her system. She gently lowered back to the base of what she could only assume was a bed,

grimacing uncomfortably as pressure was reapplied to the painful portions of her lower back. She gritted her teeth in discomfort, feeling as someone brushed her hair out of her face.

“There you go,” a voice hums close, no doubt the person who fixed her hair for her. Weiss grunts slightly, fluttering her eyes and wincing at the bright white that meets them. She closes them again.

“Light...” she croaks out, her voice hoarse and throat dry. There’s another shuffle beside her, and a quick click before the light beyond Weiss’ vision dulls a bit. She squinted her eyes slightly, only to find the blinding glow has been replaced by a duller white, one much more manageable than before. She felt her body relax under it as the last of her adrenaline died off, her head sinking deep into the pillow beneath it.

“Better?”

“Yes,” she whispers back, finally finding the courage to open her eyes again. She’d met with two relieved - and frankly quite exhausted - faces. Blake and Yang towered over her, in a mixture of mild surprise but overwhelming relief. Weiss would have cried if she wasn’t exhausted (despite only waking up, she was already desperate to fall back asleep). Her bottom lip quivered for a heartbeat. “You’re...here.”

Yang’s shoulders jolted, either from a hidden sob or a chuckle Weiss couldn’t tell, “Of course we are, Ice Queen. Couldn’t leave you behind, y’know?” She sat down to Weiss’s left, leaning onto her knees. She pinched something out of her eyes. “It’s good to see you again.”

“Yang.. crying?” Weiss almost didn’t believe her eyes. Is this really Yang Xiao Long? The blonde oaf who punched through their bathroom wall trying to kill a spider. That Yang Xiao Long? She huffed weakly, “I guess I really am dead.”

Yang chuckles warmly, “Not yet, though you really tried your hardest. Really gave us a scare for a while there.”

“How do you feel?” Blake asked, shuffling her chair closer to Weiss’s side. Weiss pondered her response, trying to find a word that accompanied all the agony that was coursing through her.

“Like death.” she decided, lifting a shaking hand to look at her wrists. They were wrapped in bandages, but Weiss could feel the bruises underneath from the shackles. She felt a strange freedom at the ability to move her arms without being restrained.

Weiss swears she heard a purr break from Blake's voice, "That makes sense, considering how we found you." she hesitates a moment. "Well, how Ruby found you."

Then it hit her. Her partner wasn't here. Concern pooling in her gut for a moment, she looked around to make sure she hadn't missed the dolt behind her sister or the faunus, "Where is Ruby?"

"She's getting looked over by doctors before she can be discharged," Yang said, "She's gonna be so happy to see you awake. She'd sat by your bed for almost two weeks."

Two weeks? Was that how long she'd been unconscious for?

"You should go get her, Yang," Blake suggested, amber eyes watching her partner softly, "Someone has to make sure she doesn't hurt herself again running up here."

Yang let out half a laugh as she stood, stretching out her arms far over her head with a dull crack. It made Weiss feel uncomfortably small in her bed, "Sure thing. I could use a walk anyway." She looked down at Weiss again, a fond look in her face. "Please don't do any of *that* again. I don't know if Blake could restrain you like I did."

The feline beside Weiss let out an offended snort, "I have clones, Yang, and besides, I think you'll need to use all of your strength when you tell Ruby Weiss is awake."

"Uh-huh. That'll be fun," Yang turned and began to pace towards the door, "I'll be back soon, don't miss me too much."

Blake let out a dreamy sigh as Yang turned the corner, earning her a raised eyebrow from the Schnee beside her. "Did I miss something?"

The faunus looked up with a flush on her face, which sealed Weiss's suspicions, "I- I don't know what you're talking about."

Weiss frowned, “Blake, I may be injured, but I’m not dense.” The ears atop of Blake’s head drooped, her lips pressed tightly together. The Schnee sighed lightly, “You always seemed to get along. *How* is it beyond me.”

“I can always share,” Blake teased, earning a weak chuckle from Weiss that she immediately regretted, a twinge of pain spreading over her like lava.

“Tall, blonde and rowdy aren’t my type.” Weiss retorted, closing her eyes and leaning her head back as her wounds throbbed. Her hand still held the fabric on her chest, tightening every now and then as it flared. Blake watched in pooled concern, eyes flickering to the drip that resided beside her, and then back to her hands on her lap. She pressed her cat ears back, the slowed beeping and the raspy breaths of her white haired partner scarred into her brain. They resided beside her memory of first seeing Weiss the day they’d rescued her, tubes and wires attached to her bandaged body, the newly wrapped wounds already starting to bleed through.

“I’m sorry,” Blake murmured, “I helped Ruby plan everything, I just... I didn’t think she’d go to a black market of all things.”

Weiss opened her eyes again, the stickiness on their edges threatening to pull her back to sleep, “It wasn’t your fault. You’re not-” she took a breath, “You’re not a White Fang member anymore.”

“I should’ve known they were planning something- They were too quiet.” Blake mumbled, looking up as Weiss lifted her hand, reaching out to grasp hers. Blake held the bandaged hand delicately, like she was made of glass.

Weiss’s eyes were tired looking, but they held a spark deep beneath them, “Stop blaming yourself before I get Yang back.”

Blake fell quiet in shock for a second, before a shy laugh broke through. She gently squeezed the small hand in her grasp, placing her free hand to cup Weiss’s fingers in hers, “I wouldn’t like that.”

“That’s what I thought.” Weiss hummed, looking down the skin on her arms. Fresh scars peaked out beneath some of her bandages along her forearm, little patches that would stay there the rest of her life. A small frown pulled at the corners of her lips, her brows knotting together.

“Weiss?” Blake asked curiously.

“Were they bad?” Weiss said quietly, her gaze unmoving from her wrist, “The scars?”

Blake took a breath, debating on lying to her friend about the state of her body before releasing it. Weiss wasn’t always going to be covered in bandages, “They- There's a lot of them around your chest.” She said, keeping her eyes low in an attempt not to stare towards the aforementioned spot, “And down your back. I don’t know how many more there were, I’m sorry.”

Weiss didn’t respond for a while, staring down at her wrist silently. Complexion was something that ran through her family. White hair, crystal blue eyes, pale skin, it was what defined a Schnee, and it was to be maintained vigorously. For a moment, the thought of what her father would say flashed in her mind. She could remember his reaction to the scar over her eye when it first happened. Despite it being his fault to begin with, with the giant Geist-possessed puppet of her grandfather’s armor sent to test her, disgust is what she has been met with. She could remember the harshness in his tone as he went on one of his rage filled rants, while she had been forced to sit and listen, the stitches on her eye still fresh and the cotton pad faintly patched with red.

“You *will* cover that disgrace,” He had said, “See to it that nobody knows it is there. Am I understood?”

Of course, Weiss had followed his order for some time. Every morning she’d stare in the mirror and hate herself for being so weak, even though she had, in fact, killed the knight in the end. The scar had been the bane of her existence, the layers upon layers of makeup covering her face only faintly covering freshly swollen, ribbed tissue that reached down as far as the bottom of her cheek. When she began to defect from his will, she slowly started putting less and less makeup over it. She still covered plenty of it, tidying it up to be nothing but a simple line over her eyelid and above her eyebrow, but certainly not as much as she used too.

That had been one small scar, what would he think about a selection across her entire torso? Weiss liked to wear sleeveless dresses that displayed her chest, but now, she doubted her father would even approve of that. If her scars were as big and obvious as they felt against her skin, she doubted she’d ever be allowed to see society again. She didn’t even know if she could look at herself in the mirror, to see what she’d become.

Weiss used to be proud of her beauty. She’d always enjoyed her flawless skin, her sleek white hair and smooth body. It was why she showed it off when she could, with her dresses and even her combat outfit showing as much skin as modestly possible. It was something she’d enjoyed doing, and one of the few things she could enjoy about herself. Now she couldn’t even do that.

“Weiss?” She looked up, finding Blake to be watching her with an empathic look in her eyes. “Scars don’t define who you are.”

A quiet huff was how the heiress answered. How was it that Blake always knew exactly what was going around her head? “My Father will beg to differ.”

She could see the faunus tensed, her hands tightening somewhat on the hand still in her grip, “Your father doesn’t have the right to. You were attacked, Weiss, you couldn’t have prevented it.”

She could have, if only she had brought Myrtenaster with her on that day, she wouldn’t look like this. “A scar is a scar,” she breathed, pulling her hand away shakily and letting it set in her lap, “It doesn’t matter how I got it, especially to him. Beauty before health, especially for the heiress of the company.” She sneered at that last comment, those words burned deep into her mind. Starved herself if she has to stay thin, don’t work too hard to build up muscle. Men didn’t like strong and independent women, so Weiss didn’t like men.

“You shouldn’t have to follow rules like that, as a huntress-”

Weiss sighed bitterly, “I’ve done a *lot* he isn’t happy with.” She pinched the sheets slightly between her fingers. “I’m.. I’m not particularly looking forward to meeting him again.”

“Well, we’ll be right here if he comes for you,” Blake reached out and gently brushed her palm off the back of Weiss’s bandaged knuckles, “We won’t let him do anything to you.”

Weiss smiled weakly, “Thanks, Blake.”

The faunus smiled back. And not a moment later, the door to the hospital room swung open with a loud bang as it rattled off the metal stands. Weiss winced at the sound, turning to look at the source of the clattering sound only to be engulfed in a flame of roses that smothered her in it’s scent. She let out a strangled sound, which made the body pull back as quickly as it had latched onto her. Weiss fell forward, arms holding onto the pale fabric over her body.

“Weiss! Oh my gosh, I’m sorry!” Ruby backed away, hands hovering in the air like she’d committed a crime. Weiss sucked in a wavy breath, her body throbbing from the force that had just slammed into her. Her heart monitor reflected it, the slow pace speeding up slightly. “Are you okay? I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“You need to be a little more careful around her, sis.” Yang ruffled the top of the younger girl’s hair, sitting back into her seat again with a huff. “She’s still not better yet, she hasn’t got super healing powers like you do.”

“I’m sorry!” Ruby whined again, bowing her head. Weiss scowled as the wave finally passed, falling back into her pillows with a disgruntled sigh.

“You need to be more careful, you dolt.” She grumbled. She debated flicking her partner’s forehead, but judging from the hard-plastic support Ruby had on her shoulder, she was suffering enough. Ruby lifted her gaze from the floor, tears on the verge of falling. Weiss immediately felt a pang of guilt strike at her heart, her eyes widening. She thought Ruby would have understood Weiss hadn’t meant that seriously. “Why are you crying?”

“I- I’m just..” She wiped at her face, the stubborn tears still falling from her glassy silver eyes, “I’m just glad you’re okay. I didn’t think- haha...”

A warm smile bloomed on Weiss’ face as she realised why her partner was crying. She sighed, “Come here then.”

Ruby looked up in confusion, still furiously wiping as salty tears dampened her cheeks, “Wh-what?”

“I’m letting you hug me, you dunce.” Weiss said, closing her eyes and looking away as heat grew on her face. She could almost imagine the stupid smile that grew on her partner’s face before she reached in, arms wrapped tight around Weiss’s back. She flinched slightly, but kept her mouth shut. She could deal with the throbbing for a minute or two. She had a feeling Ruby had been desperately looking forward to hugging her, and Weiss didn’t mind it so much either.

She heard a snicker, and glanced across Ruby’s hood to Yang. The blonde held her hands together in a heart shape and mouthed “cute”, which made the heiress frown in annoyance. This was merely a hug between friends- maybe she was jealous?

“Do you want one too, Yang?” Weiss teased, narrowing her eyes at the older sibling. Yang grinned in response, getting off her chair and marching over, wrapping her arms around both Ruby and Weiss together. The heiress’s eyes widened in surprise, her head resting between Ruby and Yang’s shoulders as she awkwardly glanced at the tallest of them all. She hadn’t actually expected her to do it.

“I thought you’d never ask,” she mumbled into her neck, her warmth comforting against her cold body. Weiss’s lips quivered as a third presence hugged her from behind as Blake joined in. The faunus nuzzled into the softness of her hair, and Weiss could feel the care that came off all of them in waves. It was almost suffocating. Tears slipped from her eyes as a hoarse laugh erupted from her throat, her face nestled into Ruby’s cloaked shoulder to hide her shame.

These people, Weiss mused, *they’re all insufferable, getting all weepy just because I’m alive*. They’d risked everything for her, despite how mean and cruel she’d been to them in the past, despite how easy it would’ve been to leave her behind and move on. Weiss wasn’t as integral to team RWBY as the others were, at least in her opinion. They would’ve been able to function without her easily, considering she only played as a supporting huntress. They didn’t *need* her, but they still risked *their* lives to save her, and for some reason, Weiss couldn’t appreciate that choice enough.

She’d been scared, terrified even, when she had been in Torchwick’s grasp. Even though she’d tried to be brave and stone-faced, she’d never been in so much fear in her life. Every day she longed to be home, to be back in Beacon with Yang teasing her, and Ruby being a nuisance, and Blake just watching in amusement from behind a filthy novel. She’d dreamed of that every aching hour she was there. She hadn’t expected to survive, she’d been ready to accept death, to never see her friends- no, her *family*, again. But they had come for her, and now, being here, smothered by all of them in this tight, emotional embrace... She was so, so thankful.

“Thank you.” She mumbled, her voice muffled by the soft red fabric her face was pressed against. “Thank you all so much.”

*

Weiss had been expecting her father to visit her at some point, but she hadn’t been expecting it so soon.

Staring down at her new scroll that sat uselessly between her fingers, the warning message her father had sent about his incoming arrival flashing on the blue hue. She watched it as if the man was going to crawl through the screen itself and drag her back through it.

“I’m coming to visit.”

Who knew four words could be so threatening? Weiss certainly hadn’t, nor had she expected the crimson painted glare that had filled Yang’s eyes when she’d seen the message.

“What do you think he wants?” Blake asked timidly, having noticed the heiress’s concerned look over the top of her book. Yang and Ruby both looked up in dread, aware of the weight of the conversation that was incoming. Weiss took a deep breath and sighed, leaning back against her propped up bed, her gaze lost on the wall opposite her for a moment.

“I don’t know, frankly.” Weiss flatly said. “I was expecting a phone call, or something of that caliber, not an in-person appearance.”

“Why wouldn’t your father see you in person?” Ruby asked, leaning against the supportive railing on Weiss’ right. “I mean, he’s your father, and you’re in a hospital.”

Weiss huffed, glancing down at the message again, “My father isn’t like yours, Ruby. His affections are only a front for the public.” She noticed how Ruby’s eyes grew downcast at that comment. However, Weiss wasn’t one to hide the bitter truth. Jacques Schnee wasn’t a nice man behind the public eye, and she wasn’t going to start acting like he was. Weiss had doubts he even liked having children, that it was only a necessity rather than a pleasure. “He’s likely only visiting to tell me how being captured was a bad public image.”

“It sounds like your father is a douchebag.” Yang commented casually, leaning back in her wooden chair.

“Yang! Language!” Ruby cried out.

“I’m only telling the truth.” the blonde shrugged, “The fact that he’s visiting so soon is kinda sketchy considering that you were gone almost a week and he made no effort to, y’know, look for you?”

Weiss hummed in agreement, but she already knew the reason for Yang's second comment, as much as it pained her, “I’m expendable in his eyes. If I did die, he simply would’ve passed the heritage to Whitley, my younger brother - appeared on public news for a statement and moved on.” She felt something tug at her heart as her own words left her. “It’s just how he is.”

“Weiss...” Yang warbled sadly. Shaking her head slightly, Weiss looked back at the blonde with a downcast gaze. It was quite sad, if she was being honest with herself. She had tried all her life to appease her father by training, by studying into the late hours of the morning and slowly teaching herself to fit under his ideal of perfection. She’d bent her personality so much to try and be the perfect heiress, and the ideal daughter, but no matter how much she did, no matter how many grimm and how many top of class exams she did, it never seemed to impress him. She always

seemed to be outshined by Winter, because Winter was second-in-command in the Atlesian Army by the age of twenty, while Weiss was down '*playing with children*' as her father had put it.

A knock at the door brought her back out of her thoughts and put her attention towards the entrance to the room. A nurse timidly peeked her head around the corner of the door as she opened it, a fearful look on her face, "Miss Schnee? Your father is here to visit you."

She felt anxiousness pull at her heart, swallowing thickly with as faint of a nod as she could manage, "Thank you, you can send him in." The woman disappeared with a quick nod, her heels clicking as she moved further away from the door. Weiss gripped the sheets, "You guys should probably just wait outside. I doubt he'll be here for very long."

"Uh, no?" Yang said, standing from her chair. Weiss could feel the heat of her semblance warming the room again, faint embers flickering off her golden mane, "If your dad is gonna be a jerk, then we're staying right here."

Weiss sighed, "And I appreciate the thought of that, I do, but I would rather see you all after I leave the hospital."

Yang's face twisted in confusion, but thankfully, Blake was there to clear it, "Would he really take you away from Beacon?"

"If he thought you were an unsuitable team, yes," Weiss looked up at them, and then to the door, "I haven't even notified him that Ruby is the team leader, and that I am not. I think it would just be better if you guys weren't here when he does find out." She looked to Ruby, who was watching her with concerned silver eyes. If anything, Ruby would listen to her, right? "*Please.*"

Those silver eyes studied her for a moment, before relenting with a breath and standing up, "We'll be right outside if you need us." Blake stood from her left and joined Yang, who looked torn at her sister's decision. Ruby, however, didn't budge. "Weiss, if he does anything..."

"You'll be the first to know," Weiss offered with a frail smile. Ruby slowly got up after that, her gaze lingering on Weiss for a heartbeat longer before turning and leading the other two out of her room. The door closing behind them finally left Weiss alone to compose herself. She hoped they hadn't noticed her shaking, but the traitorous beeping of the heart monitor beside her had happily indicated her risen heart rate. If anything, it sounded to be a normal pace, but considering how slow her heart had been beating before, it revealed otherwise.

What would her father say to her? Nothing good, she knew that much at least. Maybe he was here to transfer her to a hospital in Atlas, where he could hire a watch on her, and ensure the public that she was alive and in the best hands possible. That also meant the unrelenting force of the press, all eager to learn even a sliver of what exactly had happened to Weiss when she was missing.

She froze, a deep panic rupturing through her chest. A coldness rushed over her at the mere thought of having to relive what happened again.

Roman frowned, tilting his head so he could line up the piece more, "I always wanted to know what would happen if you put purified Dust inside a person." An evil glint formed in the back of his eyes as he met Weiss's scared blue orbs, "And there's no better test subject than the heiress to the Schnee Dust Company herself."

The beeping got quicker, and Weiss got colder, images flashing across her vision. There was so much blood, the warmth of it sticking to her body and melting to her skin like iron. There was a horrible, sick wheezing above her, and suddenly a weight. Her heart hurt, her body hurt, the ground beneath her was hard and the overwhelming cheers of *exhilaration* around her echoed in her mind.

"Weiss..." she croaked.

"Weiss."

Weiss snapped out of her panic as her father's voice broke through the haze. She stiffly looked up to the tall, foreboding man, his wide and strong frame towering over the side of her bed. Steel blue eyes familiar to her own pinned her down, cold and emotionless. Weiss knew she'd looked like that once. She swallowed thickly, clutching her shaking arms closer to her stomach as the cold sweat on her body dried into her skin. "F-Father."

"Don't stutter, it's unbecoming," he said. Weiss swallowed, nodding silently. Her father tucked his arms behind his back, his chest pressed out proudly even as he stood over his daughter. "Use your words. We don't communicate by gesturing."

"Yes, Father. Apologies," Weiss said, eyes locked onto spots on her hands where the blood had soaked through bandages. He was missing the usual edge on his voice, Weiss realised quietly. Usually his voice was much harsher, especially when he was correcting her grammatical errors. The idea of her father potentially being concerned crossed her mind for a moment, and quickly died.

“Father, what brings you to Vale?” Weiss asked nervously after a moment of silence, “I’m assuming you didn’t leave your busy schedule just to visit me in a hospital.”

He hummed, his brows lifting in mild surprise, pulling at the cuffs of his suit jacket, “I am here to ensure you didn’t leak any of our family secrets to the ruffians that took you.”

Ah, so that was why he came so urgently. Weiss let out a soft sigh through her nose, closing her eyes as a headache began to form again. She felt like she was being interrogated for something she didn’t do. “I don’t think so.”

“You either did, or did not, Weiss.” He said, the iciness in his tone reforming and breathing across Weiss’ skin. The heiress leaned back into her bed, her fingers curling a strand of her hair around mindlessly.

She nervously skimmed off the surface of her memories, not willing to dive deep enough through the murky ocean that held the past to find out if she had shared anything crucial. There were long periods of time where she couldn’t remember anything, darkness blocking out certain images like her own body was censoring her past, the only important detail that would’ve mattered to her father was: “They had- they *used* purified dust.”

“Purified dust?” He echoed with his eyes narrowed, to which Weiss nodded unconsciously at. He grumbled, turning his back away and pacing away from the bed Weiss laid in, “Where is it now?”

Weiss gulped, looking down at her arms and the thick bandages that covered them, reaching up her limbs and disappearing under the hospital gown she was wearing, “It’s... They injected it into me. It’s in my blood.”

“I see,” The older man hummed, glancing at the beeping monitor that filled the silence between their words and then back to his daughter. His eyes held something akin to morbid curiosity, eyes moving up and down the bandages like he was examining her. Weiss curled closer to herself, a cavity formed in her chest as anxiety latched on and fed off her fears.

“Did you distribute any other classified family secrets?” He asked after another pause.

“I don’t know.”

“*Weiss-*.”

“I was *unconscious* for most of my abduction, father! I apologise but I *can't remember*.” Weiss growled, frustration building in the back of her throat. It was only after the words had left her mouth that she'd realised the tone that had sprouted from it, and she grew stiff, her heart skipping a beat. “I'm-”

“You have some nerve to raise your voice at me!” he yelled, and suddenly Weiss wanted the bed to swallow her whole, to protect her from the onslaught she was about to become victim to, “I am being extremely patient with you and your attitude, girl, allowing you to stay in Vale and allowing you to be a part of a team you are not even in charge of, without returning my calls.”

Weiss opened her mouth to defend her actions but her chance to speak was taken from her before she could. Her father turned back to face her, a scowl on his face “I am not finished speaking. Do you think I was foolish enough to not find out about you and that Rose girl?”

Weiss froze cold, the air around her becoming frigid, her breath forming clouds. “I'm not aware of what you're referring to.”

“Do *not* play games with me, Weiss.” He snapped. “I told you to become acquainted with someone equal to your skill, who would make the family proud. That was one of the conditions of going to Beacon Academy, and yet here you are, ‘partnered’ with a child who skipped two academic years yet shows no social power nor skills.”

A part of her relaxed when she realised that her father didn't know about their romantic date, although another part of her came alive with a protective urge, a raw nerve struck with his comments on her partner.

“Ruby Rose *is* a suitable partner. I would even suggest that her combat abilities far exceed mine.” Weiss grumbled back, eyes narrowed, “She is also the team leader, and is far more capable than you give her credit for. In fact, she is the one who rescued me from the White Fang.”

“Rose is also the primary reason you were kidnapped, or did you forget that?” He said snidely, standing back from the bed and straightening himself. Weiss furrowed her brows in frustration. Talking to her father was like trying to speak to a brick wall. “No matter. If you wish to live out your limited time with a band of misfits, then I will allow it.”

“...Limited time? What are you talking about?” Weiss asked, something uncomfortable settling in her stomach. Her father pulled at the cuffs on his wrists again, a sly look in his eyes as he started to turn back towards the door.

Weiss narrowed her eyes, following him as he paced over to a nearby tabletop and picked up a clipboard. He flicked through one of the pages, scanning the contents.

“Chronic Dust Poisoning, powered by an unknown dosage and unknown strength of dust with unknown properties,” he half turned back to face his daughter as the words settled in, the look of horror spreading across her face. “The survival rate is 8.3% with normal, crystalline dust.”

“What...?”

“But, *of course*, purified dust has never been experimented on with humans. Nobody knows how it will react in the long term,” He put the clip board down, “You could survive a few weeks, a few months, or you might not experience any side effects at all,” he started to move towards the door, before pausing briefly, “The public is not to know about it, and should they find out I shall make sure to remove your little team from your life indefinitely. Am I clear?”

“I... Yes, Sir...”

Weiss stared silently after him as he left her again, her throat clogged and her body trembling like a leaf. Why hadn’t anybody told her she had dust poisoning? She had expected a certain degree of it, it was only natural with so much dust injected into her system, and the coldness that lingered, but...

She hadn’t realised she was crying until she took a breath, the air catching and winding around the lump in her throat as she did. Time bled together into a blur as she sat there, her breathing and that annoying *beep beep beep* of her heart rate beside her keeping her company.

She didn’t notice the sound of the door sliding open, or the presence of her team until they appeared at the edge of her vision. She didn’t look up to meet them, instead shutting her eyes as she tried to keep her breathing under control and turning away, her teeth digging into her bottom lip as she tried to silence herself.

“Weiss?” Ruby asked nervously. “What- What happened?”

“If that bastard did anything-” Yang growled nearby, somewhere Weiss didn’t care to look. She could hear the hard hammer of her own heartbeat echoing around the room, “I’ll ask him myself if I have to.”

Blake spoke up next, a soft tone surrounding her words, “Yang... just leave it.”

“Weiss...?” Ruby prodded cautiously again, concern radiating from her aura like a lightbulb. Weiss looked away in shame, despite Ruby’s attempts to catch her eye again.

“Why didn’t... you tell me?” she whispered. It almost felt forbidden to say, like if she said she was dying, her heart would give up on the spot and end her life in a breath. “Why didn’t you tell me that I was... that I didn’t have much time left?”

There was a guilty silence after that spoke volumes, none of her teammates dared to open their mouth. Weiss's eyes stared hollowly at one of the wires connecting the machinery around her to an outlet, tucked away beneath a wheeled cabinet. Ruby draped her cape around Weiss’ shoulders as she noticed her shivers, the blanket that laid on her lap held too tight in Weiss’ white knuckled grip that Ruby didn’t even attempt to use it.

“You won’t... They’ll find a cure,” Ruby hummed softly, “Winter- she’s looking for a cure. We’re not going to let you die, okay?”

“You don’t...” Another tug at Weiss’s gut brought forth more tears, “There is no cure.”

“Then we’ll find one, make one.” Yang said finally, moving closer to the pair. “We just got you back, Princess, we’re not letting you go again. Not for a long time.”

Weiss hummed, flinching gently as Ruby’s thumb reached down to wipe some of her fallen tears off her cheeks. The edges of her vision were starting to water, letting her body slowly fall back against the overly soft pillows. A soothing set of fingers crawled through her hair, brushing it through with a touch so soft that Weiss hardly registered it.

However, as she looked up to meet silver eyes, a searing memory raced to the forefront of her mind at the sight. Bi-chromatic eyes staring at her in a body not their own, mocking and evil as they watched her resolve fall away like dead leaves.

Weiss jerked back with a breathy whimper, shutting her eyes to block out the sights of the world around her. The hand pulled away like it had been burned.

“Weiss?” came Ruby’s voice, small and concerned. Weiss didn’t look, tears squeezing their way through clamped eyelids.

“You should get some rest,” Blake said from somewhere nearby. Weiss finally opened her eyes again, staring down at the crumpled sheets that rested on her torso. “It’s been... a long day.”

“Yeah, go get some sleep.” Yang added, moving her side and resting her hand on Ruby’s shoulder. Ruby looked upset, holding the hand Weiss assumed she'd been using to brush through her hair like it betrayed her, her thumb massaging into the palm. Weiss looked away again, nodding solemnly.

“Okay,” she mumbled, loosening her grip on the blanket in her hands.

“We’ll be in touch, okay?” Blake said, shuffling the new scroll they’d given her closer to Weiss’s reach. “And if you need anything, we’re just a message away.”

Weiss stared at the device, before sighing and looking up to her friend, “Thank you, Blake.”

Blake smiled back at her, her faunus ears lifting from their previously drooped state, before she turned and slowly paced away from the bed. Yang followed her, leaving Ruby lingering awkwardly by Weiss’s side. She looked up and opened her mouth, but no words came out.

“I’ll visit tomorrow.” Ruby muttered, half-turning as she started to leave, “Goodnight, Weiss.”

Weiss watched after her, a desperation clinging to her chest. She didn’t want to be left alone. She didn’t want *Ruby* to leave her alone. She swallowed thickly, her breath trembling as her partner left her to fend for herself against the void of her own memories. “Good... Goodnight...”

CHAPTER 13 (Posted.) (5-ishk)

“Discovery”

The clacks of Winter’s heels were like warning shots to anyone around her, an angry white tiger stalking her way through the charred ruins of the White Fang laboratory. Scientists and detectives actively stayed out of her path, glancing back at the ominous pillar as she made her way into the ruined White Fang base. Ironwood had left her in charge of keeping watch and sending reports to him while he prepared for the Vytal Tournaments. But anyone who knew what had happened knew it was because it was *Weiss* who’d been hurt, and Winter was more than likely going to discreetly force her way onto the case anyway.

Of course, Winter wasn’t the only licensed huntsman on the case, or on the site. Qrow and Glynda had returned to the case and had given their aid for the past two weeks when they could. Glynda, in Winter’s opinion, was far more suited to the cause than Qrow was, especially so considering his semblance. Despite a fury-backed command given by her, the old man had stayed around ‘to help with her headache’ as he’d put it. The file she’d found on him detailed his experience with his semblance ‘Misfortune’, where it seemed everything and anything could go wrong nearby him. Winter was sure he was simply a hazard to her health, physically and mentally. She actively tried to stay away from him, sending him to investigate the abandoned cages on the east side of the facility, while she stayed closer to the west.

She let out a small breath as she stepped through the rubble doorway that led to the basement, with the lobby having collapsed during the students’ attempts to break in. Glynda and Ironwood’s machines had made quick work of breaking up the rubble into sizable chunks, allowing for easier access to the main area of interest below. Cautiously, Winter stepped down through the main entrance to the hidden lab below, the metal rattle of the grid beneath her boots announcing her entry into the cursed area. Several investigators looked up, but quickly continued with their own work, running tests on several sizable gashes in the metal work dotted around.

“Miss Schnee,” Glynda’s voice brought Winter to a stop. She turned to face the professor with a bow of respect. Glynda had her riding crop in her palm, likely having used it to continuously clear rubble to help with the investigation. Winter looked at it curiously for a moment, resting the base of her palm against her own sword.

“Your aid in clearing rubble has been a tremendous help, Professor.”

“Professor is what my students called me, Miss Schnee.” Glynda hummed, pushing her round-framed glasses back on the bridge of her nose. Winter took a breath, straightening her back and shifting to fold her arms behind her.

“Glynda it is then, this investigation would be much harder without your help. I’m grateful for all you’ve done so far.”

“How is Weiss?” Glynda’s voice held concern, understandably so. The last time the professor had seen her, Weiss had looked dead. Winter couldn’t be thankful enough that it wasn’t the case.

“She’s stable, but still comatose. I’m here to search for a cure for her... condition.” Winter explained, eager to move off the subject. While Winter wanted to be the one searching for a cure, or at least a way to help improve her sister’s condition, she would settle for being by her bedside waiting for her to wake up.

Weiss was the only member of the family Winter ever felt remotely close to, what with her mother’s drinking habit and her father being, well, her father. She could remember nights of holding Weiss under sheets while their parents argued loudly outside, promising her that she would protect her from the dangers of the outside world. She’d failed to keep her word, and she hated being reminded of that while she listened to the slow heartbeat of her sister in the silence.

“I see, let’s get straight to the point then.” Glynda said, clearing out one last pile of rubble as she recognised the unwanted weight of the topic. “Follow me.”

Winter nodded, falling in step behind Glynda as she started to lead Winter down the dark, damp hallways of the underground facility. They passed several split paths as they walked, some that led to total darkness, and some to smashed glass cages and ashes from the flaming Grimm attacks.

“Our search teams haven’t yet swepted the whole area, so stay on your guard.” Glynda spoke, her grip tightening on her crop as they went through a darker section of the hallways, the lights smashed above them. “Last thing we want is to get lost here with some unknown Grimm after us.”

Following her about, Winter felt somewhat relieved to know someone as driven as Glynda would be working with her. It gave her some semblance of comfort, especially if there were unknown species of grimm in the surrounding hallways. Winter knew from experience that hunting in pairs was strongly recommended in situations like these, with unknown parameters and attack types. Not only that, but Glynda was a Huntress who trained other Huntsmen in Beacon, a prodigy school with exceptional graduates. Winter knew she could trust Glynda to watch her back against anything that attacked them.

Driving her thoughts to the back of her mind, Winter was intrigued by finding out about the cages. The markings... The scratches all seemed to indicate Grimm, but... they all seemed far too complicated to be anything

Grimm either. She'd seen millions of types and species of grimm in the field, she'd seen their claw marks before. While some were recognisable, many were not. Some were razor thin, while others had longer tips and wider bevels toward them. Some were tiny, almost like fingernails dug into the metal.

"What do you make of these markings, Glynda?" Winter asked, stopping by the cage of what seemed to house a Nevermore, given by the feathers on the floor. "I've seen multitudes of Grimm on the field, but some of these marks I'm... unable to identify."

"Under most circumstances I would just chalk it up to Grimm scratching up the walls randomly in fits of rage. However... some of these markings are too... clean. Too well organized, thought out." Glynda replied, her face contorting in disgust as she looked upon the broken down cell. "The corpses we found had marks in them that even our specialists couldn't recognise."

"Think there might be something more to it?"

"Perhaps. We still need to fully secure the lower region where your sister was being held. Keep your weapon at the ready."

The mere mention of that place seemed to spark anger in Winter's normally calm disposition. Tightly drawing out her saber, Winter replied. "Understood."

-

"This is where they found her," Glynda came to a stop outside a wall, motioning to the panel that stuck out from it. "The security was overridden."

Winter pressed her palm against the glowing blue screen and waited, watching as the wall pulled itself in into the shape of a door and began to pull back. She furrowed her brows at the sight of it moving, pulling her hand away from the device as she stepped closer. Before Winter could step into the cell, however, a hand caught her shoulder.

"A word of warning, Miss Schnee," Glynda spoke, watching her over the rims of her glasses, "This place is extremely uncomfortable to be in, even for me. I can't imagine what it will be like for you." She let go of Winter's shoulder and pressed her glasses back up again, stepping away to leave Winter to her investigation. "The culprits weren't gentle with her."

“Your warning has been noted,” Winter replied.

“I’ll leave you to your work. You know where I am should you need anything.” With that, Glynda returned down the path they’d travelled, her footsteps fading into silence. Winter watched her leave for a moment, before grounding her mind and finally stepping into the cell space where her sister had been refined to.

Almost instantaneously, her blood began to boil.

The room was akin to a solitary confinement facility. Concrete floors, bleached white walls with thick layers of padding. There were unconnected plumbing pipes nearby, likely having once been connected to a fountain.

Blood stained the center of the room, dried into the pale concrete in splashes and dots, and crusted into a steel anklet that chained the clasp to the floor. Above that, a curved, rusted, fish-hook-like instrument hung from the ceiling, its edges tarnished and scratched from a weight hanging from it. Winter recognised where Weiss had been hanging, images of the sickening video of her sister being beaten flaring up in her mind.

The walls were painted a harsh white, thick, soundproofing foam lining them in zig-zagging patterns. Winter’s brows creased at the sight of the foam sheets. It made sense for the room to be made like this, especially given it was a crude torture chamber. The entire underground was swarmed with Grimm, even before they’d managed to breach it, and there was surely no lack of negative sounds and emotions streaming from this cursed place. It would’ve been key to keep any and all sound in this room, a twisted genius of an idea. If this had been under any other circumstance, maybe Winter would’ve been impressed, but it was Weiss who had been tormented by this.

Her fingers curled tighter into her palm as she stepped in further, her foot kicking something in the process.

Looking down, she noticed a small shard of dust laying discarded on the floor, and reached down to grab it. The shard was light and glowed dimly, a common feature of crystalline dust. It looked to have formed by itself on the floor, and was much smaller than a normally cut size. It was almost unbearably cold to hold, too strongly concentrated.

This was what Roman and his band of monsters had implanted into Weiss. Shards and shards of this cursed material were flowing beneath the skin of her baby sister, and Winter was helpless to do anything. Her sister had been nothing but a guinea pig trapped in a soundless room as monsters played with her life. Winter growled beneath her breath, letting the shard fall back to the floor.

Something shuffled behind her. Winter whirled around with her saber drawn and pointed towards whatever came near with the precision of a hawk. A young man squeaked in surprise, freezing on the spot as a shining blade threatened his life. Winter's eyes widened, quickly lowering her weapon as she realised that the scientist wasn't an enemy and sheathing it with a smooth flick of her wrist.

"My apologies," she said, folding her arms behind her back as the scientist regathered himself, "Are you in charge of this area?"

"Y-yes Miss Schnee," he stammered, pulling his mask back over his face nervously. He glanced at Winter's blade - now settled on her hip - anxiously as he spoke. "We found a laboratory with scans of your sister, we're investigating it now. We believe it might lead to something. If you'd like to follow me, I can show you."

Winter hummed, looking back to the abandoned cell for a moment, "Please."

The man nodded, turning and moving out of the small room. Winter quickly moved after him, relieved to be leaving the cursed confinement that her sister was subjected to behind her. There were no other cages, glass or otherwise, around the one Weiss had been subject to. She'd been strategically isolated from anything around her, alone and in pain and prone to inhumane experiments. Winter hated that with every fibre of her being.

Not Weiss, nor anyone, had deserved this. Her sister had always had an unfairly rough childhood, from Father's attitude to Mother's alcoholism and Whitley's distaste towards her. Winter could remember nights when she would visit shortly before Weiss left for Beacon, where she would be hiding in her room, tracing the scar over her puffy eyes. Of course, Weiss never made mention to the fact she'd been crying, neither had Winter, but they both knew that Winter had recognised it every time.

Winter remembered the night that Weiss had fought the Arma Gigas her father had set out for her. A sick trial, or an attempt to keep her home and show her that Weiss was weak. Pride had filled Winter's chest when she learned of Weiss' success, although the new scar on her face and the change of attitude towards her father was startling, to say the least. Winter had taken it upon herself to try and help Weiss improve in her abilities, both before and after the initial Arma Gigas trial. Winter wanted to know if Weiss would survive by herself, and although her skills were still lacking, she was slowly improving over time.

Weiss had been faced with trial after trial, and she had triumphed through almost every one with a new piece of her revealed with each. Winter had kept up with her sister's progress, with her monthly letters and watching the news of their first initial victory over Torchwick. This time, Winter wasn't so sure that her sister would push through to attain that victory. Nobody knew just how bad her treatment had been, but according to her medical results and the conditions she'd been subjected to, it had been far, far from pleasant. She knew Weiss would need time to recover,

both mentally and physically, but Winter worried for her. She feared that Weiss would recline back beneath the surface she'd breached, and wouldn't return to it for some time.

Whatever happened, Winter made a promise to her that she'd try and protect Weiss from what she could. Her father, the White Fang, even herself if she needed to.

"It's in here," The man said, pushing open a pair of heavy swinging doors. Winter followed in after him wordlessly, scanning the room as she entered. It was a monitoring room of sorts, with a wall of computer screens running diagnostics, scattered paper notes along desks and stamped into the floor. The room was generally disorganised, with paper files open and clipboards stacked about by investigators. Most of the scientists in the room looked up in surprise at the introduction of Winter's presence, but quickly moved back to organising notes, muttering quietly to each other as they picked out sheets of paper.

"We don't have any leads, other than the scans," The man nodded to one of the bigger screens, where MRI-esque scans of her sister were displayed on it. While Winter wasn't a doctor, it didn't take much to recognise the unnatural clumps under the skin and around the shoulders of the image, that pooled on her shoulders and fell further down her spine and her arms. Winter studied it for a moment, before looking at one at the nearby scientists.

"Download these files, have them scrubbed and thoroughly searched," She ordered, stepping away from the screen as one of the technicians quickly rushed in to complete the request. "Send any samples from my sister to the Vale National Hospital."

"Yes Ma'am."

Winter stepped back, watching as some men moved in with laptops and hard drives in their hands. She sighed through her nose, turning away to go oversee some other documents when something glinted at her. She stilled, looking back at the direction of what had caught her eye. A single panel in the wall had been misplaced, covering a hole in the wall. Winter moved for it, her fingers grasping behind the exposed corner and tugging the foamboard away. Behind it was a safe, hidden within the darkness and electronics.

Winter pulled it out easily, catching the attention of the nearby scientists and investigators, who all curiously crept closer to see what had been pulled free. Winter stood back up, brandishing her saber and carefully aiming it at the locking mechanism. "Stand back," she warned.

The men did as they were told, giving Winter free reign over the safe. She touched the tip of the blade off the hinges, frost covering it and slowly turning to ice. Once it froze, Winter reached down and pulled the hinges free with

a crack, the metal having shattered under the pressures of the freezing temperature. She sheathed her weapon as she tugged the door away, allowing who she assumed to be the head investigator to reach in and pull out it's contents.

The woman pulled out a brown file filled thick with paperwork, as well as vials with samples of blood and a strange black substance. Winter eyed them curiously, looking to the fair haired woman who held the file for an explanation.

"This might be something," she said, carefully looking through pages, "It holds accounts of Miss Schnee, as well as procedures to create what they referred to as 'Project Infusion'." Winter strode around behind the woman to look at the documents, however, many of the pages seemed to be just reports or studies from what Winter could tell from a distance.

"Do you think you could reverse engineer a cure?" She asked.

"Hm, perhaps. From what I can tell, these give instructions on how to avoid over diluting the dust dosages, as well as their chemical formula that I believe could be what they put into your sister," The woman closed the file and looked up at Winter with a nod, "If anyone can figure out a cure, it's us, ma'am. This will be a great aid in our research."

Winter felt a spark of hope ignite in her chest, a small smile forming on her face at the news, "Good. Continue to investigate the files we were provided, we can't let anything go unsearched."

"Yes Ma'am."

"Schnee."

Winter groaned inwardly, turning to face the main door to the laboratory. Qrow leaned against the support, beckoning her closer with his hand. The woman sighed roughly, carefully stepping around files and papers on the floor as she approached the rugged huntsman. He watched the investigators scurry around the room, only nodding in greeting when she got closer.

"Find anythin'?" He asked. Winter ignored his question. She didn't have time to - nor did she want to - speak to Qrow at the moment.

“What do you want, Qrow?” She questioned, folding her arms behind her back as she kept up her professional appearance, “I’d rather not have you and your unfortunate semblance near here, considering how crucial these documents are.”

“Yeesh, relax Ice Queen,” Qrow chuckled, stepping away from the door, “I’m here to help just as much as anybody else.”

“And yet you still haven’t told me why.”

“My niece has grown quite close to your little sister, and who am I if I don’t help my distressed niece in a time of need?” Qrow spoke, reaching into his coat and pulling his steel flask from it. Winter narrowed her eyes at that statement. His reasoning was sound, at least.

“Anyway, as much as I looove your company, there’s something you need to see,” He said finally, closing the cap of his flask and starting to walk down the hallway. Winter quietly started to follow him, scrunching her nose at the stench of alcohol that came from him.

“What did you find?”

“A grimm corpse.”

Winter stopped in her tracks, an unamused look on her face, “If you’re done wasting my time, I have an actual lead on my sister’s health-”

“For a military leader, you don’t have much of a brain, do ya?” Qrow cut over her, putting his hands in his pockets as he glared at the Schnee. Winter stared back, her brows creased in frustration. Qrow continued: “Grimm don’t leave bodies behind, this one *has*.”

Winter examined his stare for a beat, trying to pull apart his case. The older man stared back, no hint of amusement or sarcasm on his features. She narrowed her eyes at him, following back into step behind him, “You think it’s another result of experiments similar to what my sister went through.”

“It could be,” Qrow shrugged, “But that means if the grimm in this facility had human beings inside them, then there are unknown hybrids out in the forest somewhere that escaped the fire.”

That was definitely a concern. Winter nodded, “I’ll send some men to try and locate them immediately. Is there anything else you came across?”

“They’re much stronger than regular grimm, from what I’ve read in the reports.” He began, nodding to one of the filed down gouges in the metal rails, “One escaped, what was supposed to be a small Beowolf.”

“A Beowolf could not have made those kinds of marks-”

“Except it did,” Qrow said, “Because it had a person inside of it. Some of the reports called it similar to the strength of an ancient.”

Ancient Grimm were some of the oldest Grimm left remaining on Remnant. Usually, they remained hidden, their time alive giving them enough knowledge to know how to avoid humans, and how to fight them. They were extremely rare, and extremely dangerous. Winter had read reports on ancients killing entire platoon’s worth of soldiers before.

“They were trying to bioengineer faunus to try and make them part Grimm. They were going to lead a war using experimental soldiers with the powers of ancient and alpha grimm against the humans.”

“They would’ve turned into monsters,” Winter mumbled under her breath, her fists tightening in rage, “They tried to use my sister to start a *war*.”

“Possibly to pin the blame on the Schnee family,” Qrow muttered, before slowing down, “It’s just in here.”

Winter stopped beside Qrow, looking through one of the few intact glass cages to a black and grey shape curled in the corner. It huddled into itself, stiff and lifeless. Winter could make out legs curled beneath it, akin to a spider in death, except she was sure she could see hard hooves on the ends. Immediately, her senses went on high alert, the hair on the nape of her neck raising as she drew her sword.

Qrow pressed a keycard to one of the nearby access points, allowing the hidden glass door to open and both hunters to pass through. Qrow pulled out his own weapon, the heavy greatsword glinting in the fake white light. He approached the shape carefully, prodding the body with the tip of his weapon to see if it was alive. There was no response to the pokes.

Winter got closer, moving around so she faced the front of it. The black shape looked like a grimm; an inky black body with white boney armor, red markings blossoming across the white on its body. However, Winter had never seen a Grimm look so disconcertingly human before. It looked as if the darkness of the grimm energy had swallowed a human up, the armor plating in the same spots where human armor would be. Winter could make out distinct bodily shapes as well, each of them a perfect match to a human. The anatomy was almost perfect, if it wasn't for the centaur-esque lower half.

"It holds similar features to a Nuckelavee, but I've never seen one look so human before," Winter said, lowering herself to get a better look at the body. Carefully, she pulled the exposed human-looking wrist closer, finding a spout of red veins originating from it. "You believe it was the aftermath of an experiment?"

"No other explanation for it," Qrow shrugged, kicking at one of the horse hooves, "I've seen thousands of grimm, all shapes and sizes, and all ages, but this?" He gestured to the body with his blade, "This is new. I've seen younger Nuck's before, but they don't look like this. This is missing the horse head, it's only got single toed hooves."

"Hm, you're right. We should bring it in for further examination then." Winter stood back up, starting to move back towards the glass door they'd come through, "If there's anymore of this bre-"

A rustle behind Winter made her stop, followed by a deep growling groan sound. She snapped back to face the grimm as it began to stir, sitting up from its side and trying to get its feet beneath it. Qrow jumped back, sword held in front of him with a look of frustration on his face. Winter quickly backed off as well, pulling the trigger that released her smaller, thinner blade from within her main one.

The grimm slowly came to its feet, its mouth open in a drooling groan as it got its bearings. The two huntsmen watched in shock as frail flashes surrounded its body, an aura starting to regenerate around it. Winter's eyes widened, looking to Qrow for an explanation.

"Shit- The person's aura must still be active," Qrow grumbled, quickly changing his blade into its lengthened scythe form, the gears inside the mechanism switching and moving around each other as the blade locked into position. Winter narrowed her eyes on the Centaur as it positioned itself, more of the hard bone armor that plated it growing from its back like spines. It grunted and groaned at the new growth, arching its back as it grew.

Winter noticed the armor growth immediately, “We need to incapacitate it before it can complete its regeneration.”

“That’s the plan, Ice Queen!” Qrow called, twirling his scythe behind him and using the shotgun on the tip of it to blast onto the monster's back. It let out a petrifying scream in response, the sheer volume of it enough to force both of them to cover their ears. In Qrow’s defenselessness, the Centaur snapped its head around fully to face Qrow on it’s back, fire glowing in its throat.

Winter, however, quickly stepped in. A tall, silver Beowolf confronted the Grimm, claws ripping at it’s chest. The Nuckleavee turned around in surprise as it’s aura flashed, the fire that had aimed for Qrow ripping towards the wolf instead. It shattered the summon in an instant, continuing past Winter and melting through the glass barrier, where it scorched the wall on the outside of the cell. Winter gasped in surprise, sweat beading on her forehead from the mere heat of the blast.

“*SCHNEE!*”

She turned back around, raising her sword just in time to block a clawed hand from cleaving her in half. Her own aura flashed slightly at the impact, her muscles straining against the strength of the beast. She grit her teeth in frustration, aiming her smaller blade to the monster’s unarmored stomach and summoning a glyph. Ice shot from the magic sigil, piercing through the monster with a wet squelch. Qrow staggered back as red, human blood splattered on his face, his scythe locked around Grimm's neck. He fired off his shotgun again, the inertia enough to completely behead the grimm in a single strike.

It’s screech filled the room again as the horse-half reared up. Winter moved quickly, using another pair of glyphs to hold the creature down and impale it with another two shards of ice. The body went limp, the horse portion of the monster fading away as a normal Grimm would. However, it left behind the human shaped blob, the darkness that had surrounded it fading with the horse. Winter scrunched her nose and turned away as it left behind a greyed human corpse.

Qrow cautiously stepped closer, shifting his scythe back to it’s greatsword mode and hooking it back onto his lower back, “Red and black blood. Poor faunus.”

Winter ignored him, reaching for her scroll as she wiped droplets off her face, “I need a recovery team at my location. And bring a body bag.”

“Ma’am? Do you require medical aid?” The voice called back on the line. Winter glanced over her shoulder to the decapitated body, thankful that the empty gaze was looking away from her.

“No, we’re fine. Just a team with a bag.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Well, at least now we know that they were doing human experimentation,” Qrow shrugged, wiping his face with his hands. Winter stared at the body in concern.

“Indeed. Are there any Grimm like this in the facility?”

“Dunno. I didn’t get to go much further than this because your goons were blocking entrances.”

Winter hummed, narrowing her eyes as she reconnected her blades, “We need to make sure none of these experiments escape. If they can evolve in power that quick, they could kill thousands if they reach cities.”

“There could be some out there already,” Qrow said, reaching for his flask and taking a deep swig of alcohol, “I’ll let Oz know. Maybe he can send out some teams to hunt them down.”

“I must go and contact General Ironwood with the update, and then my sister,” Winter said, stepping away from the body and back towards the door. She paused just as she was about to leave, one last thought lingering on her mind. She sighed, “Thank you for your service, Qrow. Your help was greatly appreciated.”

Qrow laughed huskily, wiping his chin of alcohol with the back of his hand, “Sure thing, Ice Queen. I hope your sister gets better soon.”

“Thank you.” With that, Winter turned and left, looking through the notifications in her scroll. Her eyes caught Ruby Rose’s name instantly in the mountain of military related works, her brighter coloured icon sticking out like a sore thumb. She tapped into the message.

Ruby Rose (Team RWBY) 4:32PM :

Weiss is awake.

Winter's heart skipped a beat as she read over it, a weight lifting off her shoulders. She disliked the idea of missing her sister's awakening, however, the news that her little sister had woken up was good. She quickly typed out a response.

Winter Schnee 4:52PM :

I'm on my way.

CHAPTER 14 (5.1k) (Posted.)

“ Baby steps”

“So, Miss Schnee, as you might be aware there was a video posted publicly on the CCT during your kidnapping. Can you remember that happening during your captivity?”

Weiss shook her head silently, her hair falling back in front of her eyes. Of course she had seen the video, everyone had, it wasn't hard to miss. News outlets, articles, newspapers, it seemed like any kind of media had a picture of it plastered on the front page, leading to links and links of reposts. Once she'd gotten her scroll back she had felt a sick twist of curiosity in her stomach to research the whole ordeal. The video wasn't up for more than five minutes, but it was enough time for people to make copies and post it across gossip sites. She'd watched it more than once, but no matter how much she tried, she couldn't find the experience in her memories.

It was strange how human memories worked. No matter how hard she tried to pinpoint that exact moment, it wouldn't stick. It was like trying to navigate a maze that you had built on your own accord, but with no map, no help, and no idea where the entry or exit was. She was just placed in the center of it and told to escape by retracing her steps. She recognized blurry shapes and could almost feel words leaving her lips at some point. She could remember the horrible searing pain that had spilled across her entire body after the first injection. She could almost feel a ghost of the rawness in her throat from all of her screaming, though it was one of the first things her aura had managed to heal. The rest of her body though... It was taking much longer. On some days, Weiss could move around in her bed, while others - like today - she could barely even move her arms to get a drink.

“That's natural, don't worry,” the lady said, scribbling some notes down on her notepad, “It's called Post-traumatic amnesia, or in other words, it's your brain trying to protect you from yourself.” Weiss wasn't surprised at all, her tired gaze locked on her bandaged hands and the slight splotchy blood stains on them. The therapist sighed, “Do you remember anything at all? Working through the pieces you know now can help you later when your PTA passes.”

Weiss closed her eyes, sifting through the darkness. She could recognise disjointed fragments of memories, but there was one peculiar memory, one that almost didn't fit in with the rest of her own. There was a voice, younger than her own, that haunted her mind like a geist. Weiss *knew* that it was linked to the name Marion, yet she couldn't understand why. She'd tried to find a source that covered her rescue, to see if anyone named Marion had been rescued with her, or if perhaps she'd been found in the laboratories. Nothing, no student profiles, no workers profiles, nothing. The name was simply attached to Weiss and Weiss only. Despite that, the voice made Weiss's chest crumple in guilt, and she had a terrible pulling feeling that something had gone *wrong* with Marion.

“At your own pace, of course,” the woman said softly, tucking a stray lock of blonde hair behind her ear. “Pulling forcefully at your memories while you still suffer with PTA may make the memories take longer to resurface.”

Weiss relented, opening her eyes with a wince as a headache began to form, blood roaring in her ears like jet engines, “I can't remember anything, there's nothing else to say. I'm sorry...”

“That’s quite alright, Miss Schnee,” The therapist let out one final dejected sigh, glancing at the clock on her scroll. She clipped her pen back onto her clipboard and stood up, patting down her clothes again. Weiss looked up at the hustle. “Well, we’re out of time for today anyway. If anything comes to you, please don’t hesitate to let me know. You have my number.”

Weiss pressed her lips into a thin line and nodded, leaning back into the oversized pillows behind her gently. Despite their softness, her back ached in protest, causing Weiss to slowly descend back, “Thank you, I will.”

The lady bowed her head, making her way to the door. Weiss didn’t look up until she heard the affirmative lock of her hospital door, finally leaving her alone with her thoughts and the constant beep of her heart rate monitor again. She let out a long, hollow sigh, looking down and pulling thick bandages back off her wrist to look at the new pink scarring there.

Usually aura would help lessen the chances of scarring, especially with unlocked and trained aura like her own, but according to the surgeons, her aura had been negated using some kind of drug while she was kidnapped, and the dosage had been incorrect. The tiny piece of aura she had now was only a fraction of her fully unlocked aura. The remaining aura was her body’s natural immunity trying to save itself from withdrawals, but she was on medication to help with that. It was something that would recover in time with therapy, alongside her muscle’s strength and other functions that had suffered.

She hated that she had become such a burden to these people. She couldn’t even walk around by herself anymore, the muscles in her legs weakened from her prolonged period being suspended in the air. She was a cripple, all of her pride and independence as a Schnee that she had fought for had been stripped away from her in a single week.

She *hated* it.

Weiss gulped down the lump in her throat, grounding herself with a deep breath and reaching for her scroll. She needed to distract herself from those kinds of thoughts, the pain in her chest would increase tenfold with them. The professors had been kind enough to post the notes from their lectures online for her to read through during her hospital visit, however they had not made it mandatory. The only real assignment work they’d given her was to read through some of the more crucial notes that would be required for the finals this year. Weiss had already worked through these notes, and was simply recycling and rereading what she had access to. It got boring very quickly, especially considering how she was due to remain under hospital supervision for another month at least.

She groaned at the thought, turning on the blue screen. It reopened onto an article she had been reading about herself that had been published that morning. The cover picture was of her sister's airship on the roof of the hospital, with Winter, Ruby and several medics rushing her into the building. Weiss narrowed her eyes at it.

Vultures.

She quickly scrolled past that, returning to where she had been:

'...Weiss Schnee is believed to have been kidnapped by the terrorist group The White Fang, led by Sienna Khan, who is believed to be working in tandem with the wanted criminal Roman Torchwick, where she was inhumanely tortured for five days straight. A five-minute video of her abusers was posted on the CCTV on Tuesday morning, showing Weiss hanging from chains as a White Fang member made demands towards Jacques Schnee, CEO of Schnee Dust Company Ltd., who is currently under fire for the working conditions for the faunus in SDC mines. Her rescuers were members of her own team, Team RWBY, who ignored school rules to rescue her during Storm Berel and stormed an undercover White Fang base alongside the prestigious Team CFVY. Weiss Schnee underwent an 8 hour surgery once she arrived at Vale National Hospital. Fortunately it is understood that she is currently in a stable condition. We asked one of the head doctors in Vale National Hospital about the situation. They said:

"Miss Schnee is currently in the hands of several of the most renowned doctors and surgeons available. She is in a stable condition and will continue to be monitored extensively for several weeks. Despite her current stable condition, due to the nature of her injuries, there is a concerning chance that her condition may drastically change."

Jacques Schnee, CEO of Schnee Dust Company Ltd. and father of Weiss, made a public announcement on television last night regarding his daughter's capture. "My daughter was a victim of a crime. The monsters that helped in the kidnapping of my daughter shall be severely punished for their crimes."

Live updates of this story will be provided here at...'

Weiss closed the page, a feeling of tightness closing around her chest as she stared at the blank scroll screen. She didn't hate the media - she was quite used to their obsessive behavior around her and her family - but they were merciless sometimes. She didn't *want* all of Remnant to know about what had happened, because she had a sick feeling they would lead Torchwick straight back to her to finish the job. It was no secret where Weiss was hospitalized, and it didn't take much for a terrorist organisation to 'tie off loose ends'.

Her hand buzzed with the sound of an incoming notification to her scroll, urging Weiss to look down. A new message from Ruby appeared at the top of the long list of others, adding to the unopened pile of three others. Weiss watched it as the screen faded to dimmer light, before tapping on the notification.

RUBY ROSE (COOKIE MONSTER) ONLINE

RUBY 14:22

‘Heya Weisssss’

RUBY 14:54

‘If you need anything i’m here’

RUBY 15:14

‘How are you feeling? I can come visit if you want’

Weiss rolled her eyes, letting her scroll drop to her side without an answer to Ruby’s messages. She loved Ruby, she did, but she could be a bit *much* a lot of the time. Weiss’s scroll was constantly beeping from notifications, with most of them being from either the RWBY team chat or from Ruby herself. Her unending pool of energy was too much for Weiss’s tired mind, and she wasn’t exactly eager for Ruby to tackle and hug her again any time soon.

Weiss still didn’t even know how to feel about their... date.

Or at least the pieces she remembered. The missing chunks of her memory extended to a few minutes before, too. What remained there was confusing. She remembered standing with Ruby beside the lake and lamenting on how disappointed her father would be with her if she was romantically involved with her partner. Then, Ruby said something to her, and later the two of them were incredibly, incredibly close to each other. Weiss remembered sensations, a warm rush crawling down her neck, the intense smell of roses that filled her every sense. For a beat, all she knew was Ruby. She was everything, all her senses, latched onto her and hungry, leading her... somewhere.

And then, nothing. A silence in her memory, like it had just been wiped away. She didn’t remember being jumped, but she *knew* they had been, nothing tangible came to her grasp when she reached for it. It was incredibly frustrating.

But that didn’t change the nature of Ruby’s intentions to even invite her out. It was sudden, and if Weiss remembered correctly (which in hindsight, wasn’t likely) Ruby had struggled with even asking her, which was

strange. Ruby had asked the entire team out on ‘team bonding’ activities without much of an issue, and she never had an issue dragging Weiss out on her ‘partner bonding’ training sessions. What made this different?

The thing was, Weiss knew that she knew what had made it different, but did the gods really did grant her any mercy? The blurry mush of shapes and senses she felt before they were jumped was the key, but until it cleared, she’d be stuck wondering what had happened between them.

A second beep from her scroll turned her vision towards the screen again, this time displaying a notification from Winter. Weiss physically perked up, opening the message. If anything could cheer her up, it was talking to her sister.

SISTER (WINTER SCHNEE) ONLINE

SISTER 15:17

‘I’m coming to visit you. Is now a good time?’

A smile blossomed on Weiss’s face, looking to the door as if Winter would walk through it on que. When it didn’t move, Weiss typed out a response:

WEISS 15:17

‘Now is perfect.’

SISTER 15:17

‘I’ll be up in a moment. Sign in for visitation is required.’

Weiss huffed a half laugh at her sister’s wording. Always so formal.

WEISS 15:17

‘Ok.’

Five minutes later, Weiss's reading was interrupted by a gentle knock on the door. She lowered her scroll and cautiously sat up, wincing at the tightness of her skin as she stretched beneath her hospital gown, "Come in."

The door pulled open, and as expected, Winter appeared behind. She smiled over at Weiss as she closed it behind her quietly, striding over with all the professionalism of an Atlas Official before taking a seat beside her sister. Weiss felt her eyes gazing upon the bandages on her arms and neck, and saw the hurt and guilt that flickered in her eyes. Weiss pulled her arms closer to her.

"How are you feeling?" She asked, looking away from the bandaging on her skin and to Weiss's eyes. Weiss's smile faltered into a small frown, looking away from Winter in shame.

"I'm getting better," she said softly, "The therapist was here only ten minutes ago."

"Oh? How did that go?"

Weiss took a deep breath carefully, the pain in her chest still present despite the high dosage of painkillers and aura multipliers she was on, "Well, she said I have post-traumatic amnesia, which is... positively *delightful*."

Winter's gaze softened with worry at the news, "I see. Did she say you will recover your memories?"

Weiss let out her sigh, balling her fist until she could feel her nails digging into her palm, "I don't... want to remember, if I'm being honest."

Weiss heard Winter shuffling closer, her gloved hand reaching in and unballing Weiss's fist with her fingers. Weiss flinched slightly at first, a quiet gasp breaking through her breath. Even still, Winter held on.

"Weiss, I can't even imagine what you've been through, but you can't keep it to yourself," she said softly. Weiss looked away in guilt. She knew Winter was right, but she didn't like the concept of having to tell people what happened to her. To have to relive what happened to anyone who's curiosity would get the better of them.

Winter sensed this, and continued, "You don't have to tell me, or your team, but please try to be open with your therapist. They have-"

“My best interest at heart,” Weiss interrupted, her shoulders slouching, “I know, Winter.”

Winter watched her carefully for another minute, before releasing Weiss’s hand and sitting back straight. She reached for her scroll on her hip, bringing back the memories of the article to Weiss. She wondered if Winter had read them, or if she had contributed to a few. Doubtful, she had been busy with the investigations.

“I do bring news,” Winter said from her scroll, peaking Weiss’s attention, “The... condition... you’ve been diagnosed with. We may have found somewhat of a cure.”

“So it’s a condition now?” Weiss sneered.

“It’s far more than Dust poisoning, Weiss, you know that.” Winter retorted, meeting Weiss’s stare. “If it was dust poisoning, you would already be cleared of it and sent home.” Weiss moved her glare away, locking to her hands again. She gripped her scroll tightly.

“So, what? The medication they have me on isn’t working?” She grumbled again.

“Weiss, you have purified dust particles in your entire system. I saw the scans, it’s not...” Winter debated her words as Weiss’s eyes locked to her, “It’s not normal. You have physical dust clumping beneath your skin, in your blood- You’re lucky you’re even *alive*- those animals- they-”

Winter stopped as her voice cracked, her head lowering to the floor as she pinched her eyes. Weiss watched on in astonishment. She’d never seen Winter openly cry before, especially not in front of Weiss. She knew Winter had cried, of course she had, but it was usually hidden away from public sight. Alone. Seeing her so open, and watching as streaks slipped down Winter’s cheek made her freeze.

Winter sniffed, sitting back straight. Now that Weiss looked for it, there were signs of exhaustion and previous tears on Winter. Black bags under her eyes hidden beneath a thin layer of skin foundation, bloodshot eyes. She didn’t look like she was an Atlesian Commander anymore, now she looked like the older sister who was terrified of their father, who’d keep Weiss close to her as their parents screamed terrors long into the night. “Winter...?”

“Apologies,” Winter croaked, tucking hair back behind her ear as she recovered herself, “Like I was saying, whatever they did to you, I had never seen before. With purified dust especially. It’s an entirely new situation, but we

found something at some of the labs where you were... kept.” Weiss knew the word ‘experimented’ had lingered on Winter’s tongue for a breath, but she was somewhat relieved she hadn’t uttered it. “Scientists are trying to reverse engineer a cure for whatever is going on in your body.”

Weiss watched her sister with an ache in her heart, rubbing her arm self consciously, “How long will that take?”

“We have some of the best minds in Remnant working to get it, so hopefully not too long,” Winter said, “Until then, though, you’ll probably have to go through a few procedures to get the dust build-up removed.”

“More surgeries,” Weiss groaned, “Great.”

“Not too many,” Winter said softly. She shuffled closer again, “You know I’m always one call away if you need me.”

Weiss nodded, “I know, Winter. Thank you.”

Winter’s eyes softened in response, slowly glancing to the cards that were draped across the end of Weiss’s bed. Her gaze softened at the sight. Weiss followed her sister’s gaze, and let out a breathy laugh as she realised what Winter was looking at. “Ruby brings me cards every time she visits, from people in Beacon.” Weiss looked at them with a weird fire glowing in her chest. There were cards of all kinds there, modest ones, colourful ones, and the one from Yang that said ‘Feel PET-ter soon!’ with a picture of a corgi plastered on the front of it. “I think three of them are from Ruby just because she thought the pictures were cute.”

Winter chuckled slightly, “I see. Ruby is quite the girl, isn’t she?”

Weiss narrowed her eyes slightly at the idea of the conversation that was about to come up, suspicious of her sister’s intentions, “Yeah. You got to meet her during everything, right?”

“I did,” Winter hummed, “She was... extremely concerned for you.”

Weiss sank back into her bed, her back slowly going into a full spasm, “She’s very... openly emotional. She can be a bit much sometimes.”

“I see.” Winter looked at the cards again, “What of your other team members? Blake and Yang, was it?”

“Yeah, yeah that’s them,” Weiss sighed. Something comfortable sat in her chest as she talked about her team, something like pride. An honor to be telling her sister about her found family. “Blake’s very quiet. It took her a week to actually hold a conversation with us for more than five minutes.” Weiss chuckled at the memory. “And Yang, well...”

Winter tilted her head slightly, but Weiss was still smiling, “She’s just an annoying brute. Always telling horrible jokes at the worst time and making flirty jokes that I never know how to respond to.” Winter cocked a brow, “But it wouldn’t be the same without her, even though I have to lower my brain cell count to understand her ‘memes’ sometimes.”

“Memes?” Winter echoed. Weiss shrugged her shoulders.

“Internet jokes, apparently.”

“Ah.”

“Ruby’s strange, though,” Weiss continued, her earlier trail of thought returning to her, “She’s so eager to put her own life before others, but she’s childish. Her hopes and dreams are all akin to that of fairy tales.”

“You were with her the day you were kidnapped?” Winter said carefully, quietly, almost like she was afraid to bring up the topic. Weiss didn’t particularly want to either.

“I... I believe so, but I can’t be certain,” Weiss lied, “It’s one of the things I can’t... remember.”

“Of course,” Winter replied, quickly receding the question, sensing the discomfort in her sister’s words. Weiss was thankful for her awareness.

“Thank you,” Weiss said quietly, feeling the buzz of her scroll in her hand. She looked down as her screen lit up with another message from Ruby, adding to the unanswered pile.

RUBY 15:32

‘We’re gonna come visit in a few hours, Blake n Yang went to go get books’

“Excuse me for a minute,” Weiss said, opening the keypad on her scroll. Winter bowed her head in response.

WEISS 15:33

‘Alright. Winter is with me now, though, so I apologise for slow responses.’

RUBY 15:34

‘Winter's there? Say hi for me!!!’

Weiss chuckled warmly, closing her scroll screen, “Ruby said hello.”

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The Library was quiet today. Beacon Library was modestly big, especially considering it was one of the most prestigious schools. It consisted of three floors, each separated sections of history books, fictional stories, and old, old texts and archived reports. The third floor was strictly used for communications, fully decked out with communication consoles up to the newest standard. Some students lazily drifted in the halls, all older than Blake and Yang. Anybody who recognised the pair would probably be asking why the second years weren’t training with the rest of their team, preparing for the Vytal festival that would be arriving soon.

Luckily for them, none of them questioned it either.

Blake hid amongst the shadows of the bookshelves, dwarfed by their towering height. She reached amongst the spines and pulled out a book that caught her attention. ‘The Purest: A theory on the existence of purified elements’. A book on pure dust, and likely a book trying to decipher the effects of it. Blake quickly pushed it back into the gap she took it from. They all had too much of an experience with pure dust recently. The idea of holding the book left an itchy feeling in her palm.

“So, what book did Weiss want again?” Yang asked over Blake’s shoulder, her hands tied and leaning against the back of her head. Her school coat was removed and tied around her, leaving her in her almost too tight shirt, her

ribbon loose and her top two buttons undone to reveal her chest. Blake lifted her hand, revealing the book they'd come for.

"Waking the Tiger?" Yang read, leaning closer to Blake's hands.

"It's a book on traumatic recovery," She explained, continuing her own search through a selection of books, "I think it helps with peace of mind."

Yang leaned back again, her eyes scanning the thick shelves of book spines, thick and thin. Some of them were familiar to her, quotes that Weiss had given her once upon a time flashing in her mind. Some just seemed silly to her, like, 'Dust: Uses in Food' made her chuckle. She'd tried using fire dust to cook an egg once by cracking a thick crystal and half and trying to fry it.

The egg had just gone up in smoke.

"Sooo," Yang looked back down at her smaller partner, her eyes focused on her bow over her ears, "If we have the book, why are we still in here? Ruby won't wait much longer."

Blake stood tall on her toes and grabbed a book, examining the cover with curiosity, "I was looking for this, but I got it, so we can leave."

Yang, now curious, leaned over Blake's shoulder again. "'Demon's Desire', huh? Blake Belladonna! Have you no shame?"

Blake leaned back with a smug look in her eyes, glancing at the exposed skin on Yang's chest, "Speak for yourself, Miss half naked."

Yang let out a dramatic gasp as they began to leave the maze of tall bookshelves, heading towards the digital scanners to scan the books out, "I am not half naked, I'm simply enjoying the breeze."

Blake snorted, and Yang's heart stopped in her chest as the feline looked back with warm eyes, "You could at least wait until we got back to the dorm."

“Oh yeah, then I could be fully naked!”

Yang didn't miss how Blake's face turned redder than Ruby's cape, the small flecks of black fur on the faunus's neck lifting. Nor did she miss the elbow that dug into her ribs and winded her.

“Shut up!”

Yang let out a hearty laugh, full of joy and fun. Blake couldn't help as her obnoxious partner's aura spread to her, infecting her own face with a grin of her own.

“I thought your ‘secret’ lab was supposed to be a *secret*.”

Blake stopped like a statue, her cat ears beneath her bow twitching to attention as a hushed voice caught her attention. Her bow swivelled as she tried to relocate the sound, and the source. A sinking feeling hooked her gut like a fishing pole and tugged. Yang took several more paces before she noticed Blake's sudden stop. She turned, clearly unaware of the situation.

“You coming? I could always just get naked back here, y’know. Not like anybody is looking for books on...” she turned to the nearest shelf and read the first book title she saw, “... *relative theory*...”

“Shh,” Blake ordered, lifting her head and craning her neck. Yang quickly noticed the change in attitude and shuffled closer, taking quiet steps as her arms dropped from the back of her head.

“What?” She whispered. Blake held up a finger, telling her to wait for a second.

“I told you you couldn't trust him- Roman is a goddamn con artist-”

Yang and Blake immediately met each other's wide eyes in alarm, both suddenly alert and tense. Blake scooted closer to the bookshelf where the speaker stood on the opposite side, crouching down low. Yang joined her, straining her hearing. Blake carefully lifted her bow half off her ears so that she could hear clearer.

This wasn't right.

"Uncle- she's alive- yes, she's alive! They're going to figure it out- No, she's in the hospital."

"Is he talking about...?" Yang whispered quietly. It certainly sounded like he was talking about Weiss. Something that Roman was involved with that ended with a girl in the hospital? That was too many coincidences to be an accident. Blake knew that.

"Sounds like it," Blake agreed, looking at the bookshelf they were hiding against. They weren't very far from the end. "We need to confront them."

"Uh, *hell yeah* we do," Yang whispered harshly, grinding her fist into her palm. She stood straight and started to strut towards the end of the bookshelf. Blake watched as she walked, immediately feeling remorse for the unfortunate victim that'd meet the other end.

"Okay- okay I have to go- I'm not even supposed to be out of class, I'm only talking to you because if anyone finds out- yeah. Yeah, okay. Bye."

Blake stood with the person as he put the scroll away. He looked up and groaned loudly, looking toward the bookshelf. Blake met his gaze with her own through the gaps, and she watched as panic suddenly shot to the forefront of his gaze. They moved quickly, pivoting on their heels and taking heavy steps towards the exit.

Straight into Yang.

And straight *off* of Yang.

The pillar of a woman didn't dare move, her hair practically alight in a flame as she stared down the scrambled body on the ground. Yang had already been pissed off at the idea of a student, someone who probably knew Weiss from Beacon, but upon seeing who had fallen and scrambled away from her feet, a bonfire lit up inside her..

"*Cardin.*"

The boy beneath her squirmed as Yang's eyes turned a violent shade of red, smoke starting to spill from her mouth. Yang was lucky she rooted herself to the ground, or else there'd be a murder in the library.

How poetic.

"Mind explaining what we just heard?" Blake asked sharply, appearing from behind Cardin with her bow covering her ears again. The boy met her gaze for a second, turned back to look at Yang, and slowly stood to his feet. He dusted off his legs, cleared his throat, and turned to face Blake with a stoneface.

"None of your business," He grunted, pressing out his chest. Blake's ears flattened beneath her bow, eyes thinning to threaten the sharpness of blades. Yang took another step forth, closing the gap between Blake and trapping the leader of Team CRDL between them.

"It's plenty of our business," she growled back, "Why were you talking about Roman Torchwick in the back of the library? Who were you talking to?"

"And who were you talking about?" Blake joined, folding her arms in mirror to Yang, "Because it sounded like you were talking about *Weiss*."

Cardin, as bulky as he was, looked small between the two women. His bravado cracked and shattered like glass under the pressure, his head bowing and looking away like a guilty child. Blake could see his mind racing to try and cover himself, his hands clenching and unclenching by his sides and his feet shifting. Yang was physically steaming, her hair glowing in the dim light of the library and her eyes lit red to match. Blake hadn't even seen Grimm on the opposite end of that kind of stare, and if she was being honest with herself, it was freaking her out. She could see Yang physically tense and holding herself back in her mind, but all it took was one single wrong twitch from the boy in front of her for Yang to snap.

"I don't have to tell you shit," Cardin snarled, turning away from Blake and shoving past Yang, grinding off her shoulder as he did, "Out of my way, blondie."

Blake felt the intense wave of heat from her partner as the comment, and watched as Yang's jaw clenched as her muscles tensed tight beneath her skin. The blonde looked to Blake for guidance.

Blake debated going after the boy for a heartbeat, her eyes fixated on his body getting smaller as he fled. They wouldn't get anything by attacking him in the open, they'd more likely get expelled before they figured out what Cardin was hiding. They'd just have to watch from the shadows. Cardin wasn't bright, clearly, he'd proven that a minute ago. It wouldn't be hard, and as long as they got evidence of some kind, they'd be able to beat him up legally.

After a tense few seconds, Yang finally let out a sigh, as the library doors shut abruptly behind them.

CHAPTER 15 (4.5k) (Posted.)

“A new dawn, a new day”

Three Weeks later...

Ruby woke up before her alarm, something that was starting to become common on certain days.

She reached for her scroll blindly, sending the visions of nightmares that haunted her at the back of her mind before she could think of them. Her nightmares were intense, more often than not she had woken up with tears burning in her eyes, but she'd slowly learned just to move on with them. She'd distract herself from their haunted visions until she forgot about them, and would repeat that cycle every night.

Yawning, Ruby wiped the sand from the corners of her eyes using her thumb as she turned on her scroll. 10:13, exactly two minutes before she was scheduled to wake up anyway. She sat up, stretching her arms out in front of her as the bed rocked unsteadily on the rope holding it up.

“Mornin' sleepy head,” Yang called from below her, a toothbrush shoved into her mouth as she pulled a brush through her hair. Ruby waved wordlessly to her as her brain caught up with her body, shuffling her pajama shirt back down her stomach before sliding her feet to dangle off the edge of the bed.

“Mornin',” Ruby said sleepily, sliding off the bed and hitting the ground with a hard thud. She reached up and stretched her back as she stood back up straight, hearing a satisfying crack as she did. “Where's Blake?”

“Bathroom,” Yang pointed towards the closed door with her thumb, “I wish she’d hurry up tho’ because I have an entire mouthful of toothpaste I gotta rinse.”

Almost on cue, the feline slipped from the bathroom, her purple eyeliner fresh on her eyelids, hair freshly washed, and her hands wrapped around their full clothes hamper. Yang didn’t waste a beat sliding into the bathroom, where Ruby heard her spit out her toothpaste into the sink.

“Morning Ruby,” Blake greeted, reaching down to pick up one of Yang’s neck warmers and putting it into their hamper. “Going to see Weiss today?”

“Yep!” Ruby chirped, her chest lifting at the idea, “Once Yang gets out of the bathroom.”

“The lovebird must find it’s significant other!” Yang called from the bathroom, mocking a posh accent she’d heard in a nature documentary. Ruby rolled her eyes playfully, her mood too high to be weakened by Yang’s jokes. Today is the only day mid-week that she gets to see Weiss. As much as she wanted to, once the initial two weeks after the incident had passed, many of the teachers started to request that team RWBY, or what remained at the moment, returned to their studies to prepare for their final exam. The fighting portion had been waived and the team given a full pass due to the circumstances, however the written exam was still a very real looming threat, and without Weiss tutoring her nightly Ruby was almost starting to fall behind.

Almost.

So, Ruby had been limited to one visit to Weiss per week, and then wherever she wanted on weekends. Today was the day mid-week that Ruby was exempt to go and see her partner, mainly because today was the day the school had assigned team training days.

“Yang, leave her alone,” Blake scolded, clicking the handles of the clothes hamper closed and opening the dorm door. She smiled at Ruby, “Have a good time. Tell her I ordered that book for her from the library. It should be here within the week.”

“I will, thanks Blake,” Ruby smiled back as the girl left the room, catching the door with her foot and closing it behind her. Yang popped her head out of the bathroom at the sound of the door closing, before looking back to Ruby in curiosity.

“You wanna shower before I do?” Yang asked, pointing behind her. Ruby nodded eagerly, unwilling to wait an hour for the blonde to brush and wash her mane of blonde hair.

“Yes, please!”

The Banquet Hall was full of chattering students, each year scattered around the four massive tables that spaced the huge room. The vibrant colors were eye-catching, each student geared out in their uniform, their pajamas, or their combat outfit accompanied by their mirage of weapons. Ruby recognised a few heads dotted around the room, like JNPR, who sat in their usual spot close to the back of the hall. Normally, team RWBY would be sitting with them, but today the spot across from them was empty. Ruby felt bad for leaving their friends alone, she enjoyed their talks in the morning.

There were a few others too, like team CFVY who sat nearer to their third-year friends. Ruby could spot Yatsu and Velvet a mile away thanks to their easily picked features. While Velvet wasn't the only rabbit faunus in Beacon, she was the only one who'd walk around with a pillar. They were decked out in their combat gear, the same clothes that they'd worn when they rescued Weiss over a month ago.

A month ago. She could hardly believe it had been that long since Weiss had been kidnapped.

Ruby practically bounced in place as she waited in line, the student ahead of her gazing down hungrily at the selection of pastries made for breakfast. A large chunk of them were gone, but Ruby's eyes were laser focused on the selection of croissants that sat in the back. There were four left, which meant she could grab two for Weiss as a surprise, and then her own breakfast too. She had her own stomach hoping for one of the blueberry muffins that were quickly diminishing.

Thankfully, the faunus girl in front of her didn't take it, and happily scanned her student ID off the payment scanner and left. Ruby quickly took her spot, fishing her ID out of her pocket for when she needed it, and pressed her orders on the holographic screen in front of her. Two croissants, a muffin of the blueberry variety, and strawberry milk. Ruby hesitated as she debated a drink for Weiss. Weiss always did say that having a complimentary beverage with breakfast was supposed to help with digestion...

Nah, Weiss would probably have water with her anyway.

Happy with her decision, Ruby hit the green 'confirm order' button at the bottom of the screen and held up her scroll to confirm her identity. The holographic screen flashed green, and the automated machine came to life. A pair of tongs grabbed Ruby's baked food and put it all in a brown paper bag, while the drinks machine beside her made a heavy thud noise as her milk appeared in the plastic window. With a flick, the hatch opened on both dispensers, allowing Ruby to happily grab her and Weiss's breakfast.

"Thank you, Mr Machine," Ruby chirped, reattaching her scroll to her belt and putting their breakfast into her hoodie pockets. She backed away from the self-service and made her way through the halls. The hoodie she was wearing was massive on her, but it helped with the sling she had to wear around her shoulder when she went out. It was a clunky thing, a gray plastic casing that held her shoulder in the correct position.

She was mostly healed now, but sometimes her shoulder would give a pang of protest if she pushed herself too far. The brace was supposed to come off any day now, but Ruby didn't like showing it off. It was annoying to be stopped every few minutes with someone asking what had happened. Ruby understood people's curiosity, but Ruby didn't like having to lie to people's faces. It struck the wrong note with her, so instead, she just hid it.

The air was fresh outside, with a damp moisture floating around. It had rained pretty heavily the night before, evident by the soaked stones and glistening grass, not that Ruby minded. The smell of dampness in the morning always reminded her of the forest back home in Patch, when Yang and her would go out in the early morning to play and fetch berries for their mom.

A small frown tugged at Ruby's lips at the memory, but she swiftly shoved it to the back of her mind, looking up and setting her eyes on the airship ports that waited at the end of the courtyard. The usual few were parked in wait, ready for their departure when the clock hit 10:45. A handful of students floated around them in their teams, mainly the fourth years. They had their final missions coming up, didn't they? Ruby debated going to them and asking, but silently decided against the idea as she fished out her scroll again.

She turned it on and flickered through the contacts, easily scouting Weiss's name at the top. The profile picture she had was old, one from their first few days in Beacon. When they had all moved into the dorm together, Yang had been insistent that they all take a group photo. The unfamiliarity in the photo was hilarious to look back at now. Weiss had been glaring at Ruby in it, because Ruby had decided to wrap her arm around the girl's waist and fished her in tighter to a bear hug Yang was giving with her free hand. Yang and Ruby were smiling whole heartedly, while Blake just seemed more amused than anything. They'd all taken a snippet of their own faces and set it as their profile pictures in the hours after.

Ruby hummed warmly as she remembered, tapping on Weiss's name and watching as the screen dissolved into a call. The device rang quietly as Ruby walked, with Ruby counting each of the rings before finally hearing the other end pick up. Almost immediately, a smile burst free onto her face. "Hey!"

"Good morning, Ruby," Weiss mumbled from the other end, her voice heavy.

"Oh, did I wake you up?" Ruby asked, a passive sense of guilt washing over her, "Ahh, I'm sorry! I thought you would've been awake by now."

Weiss didn't respond for a moment, worrying the younger girl as she got closer to the airships. She stopped at the bottom of the stairs that led up, not wanting to bother the older students with her talking. Another beat, and Ruby heard the end of what she assumed to be a yawn coming from Weiss.

"Sorry," she yawned for a second time, before clearing her throat, "Ah, today's Thursday isn't it?"

Ruby couldn't help the smile widening on her face, leaning comfortably against one of the stone pillars supporting the roof of the airship dock, "Yep! I'm waiting at the docks now, actually."

"I see," There was a pause on the other end of the scroll. Ruby could sense the drop in mood in her partner from where she stood. Ruby's brows drew together in worry, watching the blank screen like it alone would open up and reveal Weiss's secrets to her.

"Weiss?"

"Hm?"

"What's wrong?" Ruby asked, maybe a bit too forcibly. She couldn't help the protectiveness that urged in her stomach though, the rawness from Weiss's kidnapping still only a flimsy scab in her mind. Her anxieties picked at that scab relentlessly, and the blood that flowed from it fed it, and left some for her nightmares too.

“Oh, it’s nothing. Winter is simply returning to Atlas today.” Weiss explained, the sadness in her tone loud and clear in Ruby’s ears. Though, she understood how Weiss felt. Whenever Yang went on trips with her friends when she was younger, Ruby felt vulnerable and lonely. She wouldn’t let Weiss feel that way.

“Well, you’ll have me!” Ruby chirped, “A-and Winter is always just a scroll away.”

Weiss sighed, “Right.”

Ruby frowned, watching her scroll as silence trickled by. Weiss knew Winter had been visiting Weiss as frequently as she could, beating away the loneliness. Ruby took a breath to say something to try and cheer her up, but her words were stolen by a loud ding from the airship Ruby was due to board.

“Flight 283 to Vale City is departing in one minute.”

“That’s me,” Ruby said aloud, restarting her way back to the ship, “I’ll be there soon. Don’t miss me too much.”

Ruby heard a faint huff on the other end of the line, “I’ll try not to.”

Ruby felt her face warm slightly as she ended the call and slipped into the airship, flashing her scroll to the awaiting screen and filtering through the students looking for a free seat. She flicked her hood up as she settled into a seat with a sigh, pulling her old, trusty headphones from her pockets and slipping them on for the ride.

The crashing waves of anxiety mixed uncomfortably in her stomach as Ruby passed through the hospital's front doors to the reception. The antiseptic smell that hit her as she walked through kicked up the memories that Ruby was trying to bury of sitting hours upon hours by Weiss’s bedside and just watching the fragile rise and fall of her chest beneath all the wires and tubes keeping her alive. Ruby didn’t know if she'd ever get those images out of her head.

Tightening her grip on the paper bag in her hand, Ruby waltzed up to the open desk and to the man who worked behind it. He looked up at the sound of footsteps getting closer, smiling kindly as Ruby stopped.

“Good to see you again, Ruby. Here for Weiss?” He greeted, already typing at the keys hidden behind the countertop. Ruby nodded.

“Yessir!” She chirped, taking the authorization key that was needed to even get into Weiss’s room. It was a safety feature to protect her from press and anything else that might try and crawl in. It had let everyone have a small amount of peace of mind, especially given the circumstances of her hospitalisation.

“There’s a nurse scheduled to be there soon, but I’m sure they won’t mind you being there,” The man said, typing something into the monitor he sat behind.

“Oh, okay!” Ruby’s smile faltered a little. She had wanted to spend time with Weiss alone for a while, but the rampant amount of nurses that came to and from Weiss was normal. Weiss did have a one-of-a-kind injury. The doctors had only cleared her ‘critical condition’ status within the past week. There was just so much they didn’t know about what had happened to her partner. If only Weiss could tell them what had happened...

Ruby pondered on that thought as she stepped into the elevator and pressed the buttons to the floor Weiss was on. Weiss had been badly affected by everything, and not just physically either. Ruby hadn’t missed the slight jerks when someone would touch her, and how she’d lean away from Ruby after a little while. Ruby had begun to wonder if the girl they’d rescued was Weiss at all. The proud, outspoken and sassy girl Ruby knew was gone, replaced with a hollow version of herself.

It hurt to look at.

Ruby wondered if she’d ever hear Weiss laugh again, or ever get a glimpse over the walls she’d let down to the real girl inside all the expectations her father had put on her. Ruby hadn’t seen Weiss smile once since she’d found her, and more than once Ruby had had to pull Weiss from her own thoughts, clouded blue eyes staring empty at the bandages around her arms like she wasn’t even there.

Ruby took a long breath as she stepped out onto the floor Weiss was on, smiling politely to a nurse as she passed. When Ruby had been going through her emotional exams, an exam any student went through after any kind of trauma, the therapists had reminded her that the Weiss she knew was probably gone, or at least, wouldn’t be back for a long time. Trauma did horrible things to people, to their personalities. Time after time they would tell her not to get her hopes up, but Ruby had anyway. She’d ignored them and waited by Weiss’s bedside until she was forcibly pulled

away for medical checks of her own, or for one of the eight dust surgeries Weiss had gone through while she was in a coma. She'd waited for *Weiss* to wake up, and she thought she had. She truly thought that Weiss had come back.

Then she saw her, and how the light in her eyes had been snuffed out and replaced with a dull shadow. Felt how Weiss had jerked away from her, from *Ruby*, like Ruby was going to brand her with a hot iron.

It scared her. It scared her *a lot*, even if she tried not to show it.

But, that didn't mean Ruby wasn't going to try her hardest to try and find her Weiss in there somewhere.

Taking a breath, Ruby finally stopped outside one of the many blue doors of the hospital, holding up the keycard that would let her into it. The door buzzed, the red light on the scanner turning green as the magnetic locks opened. Ruby put her hand on the handle, steeled herself with a smile, and pushed it open.

"Morning We-"

Ruby's own tongue silenced her as she choked on it, meeting the startled gaze of her pale skinned partner, stripped from the top down to expose her features to the room. A nurse sat in front of her, undisturbed by the event as she carefully wrapped up Weiss's forearm with a new white gauze while Weiss's face discovered a new shade of red.

Ruby's eyes couldn't help themselves as they drifted down Weiss's back, examining the almost single blanket of a scar that led down her entire spine and shoulders, vanishing beneath the lower half of her hospital gown. It was still angry and red, as if it were only a few hours old. It curled around her muscles, the surface rough. It curled to fit over the toning of her shoulders, up her neck, and around to her openly exposed-

She yelped as a pillow landed in her face, blocking the view with its soft vengeance. Ruby instinctively caught it, but held it to her eyes at the humiliated, "RUBY ROSE!" That screamed behind it.

"Sorry! I didn't mean to look! I j- I'm sorry!" Ruby could practically feel the blood pumping under her skin, turning her back as an extra padded layer of protection. She heard Weiss huff in frustration, and the nurse chuckled warmly.

“Good afternoon Ruby,” The nurse greeted, familiar with Weiss’s frequent visitors. Ruby was pretty sure she knew them all by name, “How are you doing this morning?”

“I’m good!” Ruby chirped innocently, holding out the brown paper bag from her body as she balanced the pillow again in her hand, “I brought breakfast.”

“I’ll be done in just a minute, then I’ll leave you two to your breakfast together.”

“Okay!” Ruby replied, holding the bag close to her again as she focused on the unending darkness the pillow over her eyes offered. Only one thought called to her from it.

Weiss’s scars.

Ruby had never really seen the wounds, or acknowledged them long enough to see how bad they were. Weiss’s entire back was destroyed. It was almost like they had poured molten lava onto her and pried it away after it dried, pulling and tearing away whatever flesh it had stuck to like a tacky glue. She knew dust poisoning often gave a rash from her studies, but whatever kind of dust this was had burned through Weiss’s skin from the inside and set her on fire.

Ruby, again, thanked whatever gods were watching them for letting Weiss live.

“Don’t forget about your Physical Therapy soon, Miss Schnee,” The nurse spoke again, the sound of her unwrapping a new set of bandages catching Ruby’s attention, “I’m sure the ward would allow Miss Rose in given the circumstances.”

“Are you sure? I’m sure Ruby wouldn’t mind-”

“I can come!” Ruby turned around unconsciously, quickly averting her eyes to the ceiling as she realised that the nurse was only finishing wrapping Weiss’s chest and back. “I can bring out the hounds.”

“Ruby, I’m sure the nurses have become immune to your puppy dog stare by now.” Weiss groaned back, earning a second hearty chuckle from the nurse as she leaned back. Ruby felt something surge in her stomach at the quip, something hopeful as a twinkle of Weiss’ personality shined through the cracks.

“All done. Nothing feels too tight?” The lady asked, gently tugging at some of the wrapping to make sure her work was secure. Weiss shifted slightly, her cheeks scrunching a bit as she twisted uncomfortably.

“It’s fine,” She confirmed. Ruby took that as her queue to look back down. Weiss was pulling the shoulders of her gown back up as the nurse gathered up the plastic that had been wrapped around the bandages and threw them into the nearby bin. Ruby cautiously moved over, leaning over the back of one of the chairs by the bed.

“Alright then, Miss Schnee. Hopefully we should be getting those pressure wraps in soon, so we shouldn’t need to keep replacing bandages,” The woman smiled, “But I’ll leave you to your visitors. You know where I am should you need me.”

“Thank you, Kas.”

Kas left without another word, closing the door behind her with a heavy lock and leaving the two huntresses alone together. Ruby turned back to Weiss and held up the worn brown bag.

“I brought you breakfast,” She chirped, opening the paper and retrieving her own croissant from it before handing it over to Weiss. The Schnee stared at it in surprise for a moment, before taking it and peering into the contents of it. Ruby watched anxiously as Weiss’s face softened.

“Thank you, it’s perfect,” She folded the paper closed, “I’ll have it after.”

“Okay! Just make sure you eat, okay?” Ruby shuffled into the seat she was leaning on, dragging it closer to Weiss’s bedside, “You need your strength.”

Weiss huffed, “I know, I know. I’ll eat them, okay? I promise.”

Ruby, satisfied with that answer, settled back into her chair, a content smile on her face as Weiss carefully laid the bag down on the table beside her. She watched the fresh bandages rippling on her chest, and immediately thought back to the scars that sat beneath them. She frowned slightly.

“I suppose you think I’m a monster now,” Weiss commented, having felt Ruby’s gaze linger, “I certainly look like one.”

Ruby jerked her gaze away like a child having been caught stealing, “I- N-no. There’s just a lot more than I thought- Not like that’s a bad thing! Scars are cool, especially big ones like that- Not that they’re that noticeable or anything-”

Ruby clamped her mouth shut. Gods, she really needed to learn to keep her mouth shut...

Weiss frowned disapprovingly at her, “Go on, tell me what you really think.”

The sarcasm that dripped from her voice hurt. Ruby took a breath, “I’m sorry. They just... kinda caught me off guard. I know dust can give you a rash, but...”

“I look hideous.”

“What? No! That’s not what I said.”

“It’s what you implied in your ramblings,” Weiss grumbled, closing her arms against her chest. Ruby only noticed how small she looked, how thin she’d gotten. “It’s alright. I know.”

“Weiss...” Ruby whined, “Come on, you don’t look hideous. You couldn’t if you tried.”

Weiss ignored the attempted efforts, “I’ve become useless. A huntress with a chronic disease and that’s in constant pain.” She laughed bitterly, “Who would want that? I’ll be confined to the SDC as a secretary, if I’m lucky.”

“Hey, don’t say that. You’re strong Weiss, if anything, those scars prove that,” Ruby reached out to touch Weiss’ shoulder, but she jerked away. Ruby’s hand hung in the air for another minute, before letting it drop back to her lap, “Not anyone could’ve survived whatever happened to you, but you did. That’s amazing! Y’know?”

“I’m still a burden,” Weiss countered, “To everyone. To the nurses, to my family, even to my team. I’ll only tie you down.” Ruby opened her mouth to refute the claim, but Weiss bet her to it, “Don’t try and pretend, Ruby. I know none of you can partake in the Vytal Festival this year because of me, you can’t be a part of any combat classes. It’s all because of me. Maybe it would’ve been better if I hadn’t survived.”

Ruby felt something unfurl in her chest at the idea, tears springing to her eyes, “That’s not true.”

“Yes, it is!”

“No!” Ruby’s voice broke, and she sniffed furiously as she wiped the tears from her cheeks. Weiss looked up in surprise, almost alarmed at the sight of her leader crying. “We need you, Weiss. We still do, so don’t you dare even think that...”

The silence between them that lingered was long and awkward as Ruby tried to gather herself again. Weiss’s gaze slowly filtered down to her hands that rested on her lap as he waited, ashamed to even look at Ruby after what she had just said. Ruby took a long breath, wiping the tears from her eyes using the base of her palm.

“So, um,” Weiss spoke quietly, almost afraid to break the silence, “I’ve got physical therapy now... You don’t have to come, but...”

Ruby shook her head defiantly, brushing her hair from her face with a clawed hand, “No, no it’s okay. I’ll come.” She sat up, rolling up the sleeves on her hoodie. “Do you have crutches, o-or?”

“A chair,” Weiss said almost guiltily, nodding to the empty wheelchair that was stored in the corner of the room. The padding was blue, with a black steel frame and handle bars that sat out from the back. Ruby stood from her chair and grabbed it, carefully leaving it back to the clear side of Weiss’s bed. She lined it up carefully, putting the locks on the wheels when she was content.

Weiss pulled the sheets from her body, revealing her legs. Ruby tried not to notice how much muscle was missing from them, and how frail they looked in comparison to before everything had happened. Weiss scooped her hands

under them and pulled them closer to the edge of the bed, where she sat and tried to plan how to get from the bed to the wheelchair.

Ruby stepped closer, “Here, let me help?”

Weiss seemed to seriously debate the idea for a moment, looking from Ruby to the chair and then back to her legs. She could move them slightly, but not enough to support her own weight, similar to her arms. After a minute she let out a sigh, and nodded.

“Fine, but just be careful.”

Ruby moved closer, setting her hands on Weiss’s ribs carefully, “I’ll be quick. Ready?”

With the confirmation of Weiss’s nod, Ruby lifted Weiss from the chair and laid her in the chair without an issue. Weiss settled into it, repositioning her legs together and reaching for the buckle around her waist. Ruby quietly stepped back behind her and grabbed onto the handlebars.

“So, where to next, partner?”

CHAPTER 16 (5k) (Posted)

One thing after Another

“And that will be all today, class. Have a good weekend, and remember to revise for the second half of the written exam next week.”

The chorus of voices erupted in chat, students plotting amongst each other while drowning out others around them. Blake rose silently, already packing the majority of her work away prematurely. She stretched out her stiff legs with a grunt, numbness falling down her legs from the hardwood seat she'd been victim to for the past hour and a half. She really did need to start bringing something soft to sit on in these classes...

She fixed her small bag to her shoulders, clicking her scroll closed and sliding it into the small pocket in her blazer. She rubbed the base of her feline ears tenderly, gently readjusting the edge of the black bow. Her ears were starting to get raw beneath the bow on her head, something she was starting to realise would bother her more and more if she continued to wear the old piece of cloth over her faunus traits. The long hours covering them were starting to add up as raw, bald spots in her fur.

She reached up to fix the bow again uncomfortably, grunting in surprise as she bumped against a mass. She stumbled back, looking up in frustration to whoever had just walked into her.

Cardin Winchester stared back at her.

Black prickled, standing straight to attempt to meet the bully with a threatening glare, "Oh, it's you."

Blake knew her stature wasn't nearly as terrifying nor as muscular as Yang's, especially dressed in the school's skimpy uniform, but she did have a special talent with her words. Cardin's face of malice slowly molded to shock as he realised who was glaring up at him. Blake stared directly into his eyes as he quickly backed up, morphing back into the shape of students and escaping from her stare.

"Everything okay, Blake?" Ren asked, following the tail end of the students as they left. Blake craned her neck to try and follow Cardin's movements, but she lost him quickly within the crowd. She growled in annoyance, tucking her hair behind her human ears.

"Does Cardin seem jittery to you?" Blake asks, hushed. Ren hums in timid response, looking through the crowds as they start moving down the few stairs to the door for the mentioned trouble.

"He has been quiet lately."

Blake's attention is suddenly refined to Ren only, trusting her own instincts to guide her through the terrain back to the dorm house, "*How* lately?"

Ren was caught off guard by the urgentness of the follow up question, suddenly attuned to the conversation, "A few weeks? He hasn't approached Jaune since-"

“Weiss’s accident.”

Cardin's activity was starting to erect red flags. First, the event in the library when they overheard him talking about her, and now, he avoided her as if she was the plague.

“Do you think it’s connected?” Ren asked, his voice lower than before as he started to connect his own patterns in his mind. Blake turned to him, eyes narrow.

“Innocent people don't run.”

Blake didn’t believe in coincidences. Cardin had been looking for dirt on Weiss for a long time. As a result, the rest of them had been caught in the crossfire more than once, especially Ruby. If anything, Blake would’ve expected Cardin Winchester to be flourishing in the absence of Weiss Schnee. Proclaiming something about her finally being sent to ‘Princess Academy’ in Atlas, or boasting that he had always been right.

But *he wasn't*.

"Yang and I caught him talking about Weiss to someone in the back of the library the other day." Blake explained to the taller boy. She trusted Ren. The two had often spent sessions speaking together about literature or Mistrali cultures, having both been raised in their own breed of it. "When we confronted him about it, he ran."

“And now he's avoiding you?” Ren commented, listening intently.

“Yes,” Blake pushed through the dorm house door, holding it open for Ren who thanked her quietly for the gesture, “It’s not a coincidence.”

Ren bowed his head. Blake could see Ren’s thoughts flashing behind his calculated stare. Eyes could tell a thousand stories, and Blake was fluent in their language.

"What do you plan to do about it?" Ren asked curiously as the duo reached the floor their dorms were located on. Blake pondered the idea for a beat, reaching to pull her scroll from her pocket to get into her room.

What *would* she do, given the chance?

Over the short time they'd known each other, Weiss had become a tight band in Blake's family. The monochrome pair often didn't meet eye to eye, but Weiss was beginning to learn how to compromise with Blake, and Blake with Weiss. As a result, they often spent free classes together, getting to know each other beyond their outer shell, and they were similar in experience. Two people born and manipulated under something they didn't truly understand, but bonded together as they recovered from it.

Her time in the White Fang as an extremist group had been short, but it had been brutal. Blake had seen things children her age wouldn't even be able to conjure nightmares about, and had participated willingly. She'd been doctored to believe that if violence was the only way forward, then they'd conjure a war. You tried to muzzle the faunus, tried to break them, and they returned with the fury of monsters.

Of grimm.

But Blake wasn't in the White Fang anymore. She'd willingly left that life behind, a new branch to live. She thought she'd finally found it, but greed and jealousy always came back to hurt those in her life. She thought she'd moved away from her violent past of hurting those who hurt her first, but if Winchester had purposefully set Weiss up like Blake thought he had... Maybe that sadistic side of her would return.

"I don't know," she said finally, holding her scroll up to the ID scanner and pushing open the white door gently, "But if he's involved, I won't let him get away with it."

Ren seemed to accept that answer, bowing his head as he opened his own door. Almost immediately, Blake heard the rambunctious clatter that could've only belonged to Nora from inside the room. The boy laughed, carrying himself in a sense of wisdom that seemed far too great for his age.

"Send my wishes to Weiss," he cooed. Blake watched him disappear through the door before she moved into her own room with a heavy sigh.

The RWBY dorm was much warmer than the hallways, something Blake was willing to bet was because of Yang stationed between the bunk beds playing Ultimate Ninja Kaiden Grimm Fighter 7. Her hair emitted a warm glow, small embers floating from her mane every few moments. Her tan bag was discarded haphazardly at the foot of Blake's bed, seams ripped across the top of it and lighter coloured patches covering holes previously made.

Yang's head pulled back at the sound of the door closing, peering at Blake upside down from her spot on the floor, "Oh, heya Blake! How'd torture go?"

Blake hummed in delight as she pulled the stupid black bow off her ears, rubbing the soft fur behind her ears gently as they finally got relief, "You mean class?"

Yang leaned back fully, her game on pause as she stretched fully on the carpet, "That's what I said, wasn't it?"

Rolling her eyes, Blake shrugged her bag off and set it down beside Yang's, crawling onto her bed to sit cross legged, "The class was fine, but something happened after class."

Yang sat up, her playful demeanor toned down in an instant, "What?"

"Cardin," Blake said simply, watching anger blossom on Yang's face, "I bumped into him, literally, actually."

"What did he do?" Yang's lilac eyes were gone, replaced by her violent red.

"Nothing."

The blonde blinked, her tensed muscles relaxing, "...What do you mean he did nothing?"

"Exactly what I said," Blake swung her legs over the edge of the bed, "Cardin bumped into me, looked like he saw a ghost, and ran."

Yang was in disbelief, folding her arms over her chest, "Did you say anything to him?"

"Nothing. I didn't even get a chance to question him before I'd lost him," Blake sighed, "Ren came to me, so I couldn't just follow him. I wish I could've though."

“Right,” Yang deflated, her anger steaming away to nothing, “Why would he run?”

“For the same reason he ran from us before,” Blake leaned closer to Yang, all too aware of the otherwise silent room, “He’s hiding something.”

Yang bowed, half turning to glance at Weiss’s empty bed to her left, “Yeah... I think so too.”

“We need to do something about it.”

“Yeah, but it's not like we can just- beat it out of him,” Yang ground her fist into her palm, “We’d get in huge trouble for that.”

“We just need a confession,” Blake said, resting her chin in her hand.

“Uh-huh, but how?”

Blake opened her mouth to respond, but was quickly cut short as the door opened again, giving way to Ruby who was in a rush about something. Her scroll was up to her ear, and she looked panicked. She all but threw her bag to the floor and rushed to the drawers where she kept her clothes.

Yang and Blake crossed glances in confusion, mutually agreeing to put their previous conversation on pause.

“I’ll be there as soon as I can,” Ruby said into the device, pulling out a long, old black hoodie and throwing it onto the desk she and Weiss shared before reaching for pants, “Ask Winter to wait for me. Okay. Yeah. Uhh...” She looked to the ground, finding yesterday's skirt and picking it up. She sniffed it, paused, and then nodded to herself, “10 minutes, maybe 15. Yeah.”

“What’s going on?” Blake whispered to Yang, who shrugged as she leaned over to turn off her game. They both watched as Ruby nearly face planted to the ground when she stepped on her uniform skirt instead of stepping out of it.

“Okay. Okay. Bye,” Ruby pulled her phone away and flung it onto the table, reaching down and buttoning her skirt closed.

“What’s goin’ on, baby sis’?” Yang asked, leaning against the side of Blake’s bed. Ruby grunted as she pulled her hoodie over her head, not even bothering to take off her school shirt or tie.

“That was Weiss’s surgeon. They’ve finally manufactured a cure.”

A cure.

Those words seemed magical right now. Blake and Yang’s eyes widened in delight, smiles dawning on their faces as they turned to look at each other.

“That’s great!” Yang exclaims, standing to her feet with a quick hop, “That means she’ll be better now, right?”

Ruby’s hesitance to answer sends nerves rocketing through the room like quills, snuffing out the enthusiasm that’d come to life. Ruby grabbed her Airship Fastpass and shoves it into her pocket, before digging through her blazer and tugging free her wallet.

“I... I don’t know,” she finally answers, “They said they want to discuss potential side effects that could impact her career as a huntress. They want me there in 10 minutes.”

Yang reached into her back pocket and pulled out her keys to Bumblebee, the bee charm dangling off it jingling loudly, “Then let me bring Bumblebee. I’ll get you to the hospital in no time.”

“Okay,” Ruby said, attaching the clip of her cape onto her shoulders, uncrumpling the edges and making sure it flowed smoothly behind her. “If we run we can catch the next airship...” She checked the time on her scroll and paled, “If we run *fast*...”

“I’ll stay here,” Blake offered, “I’ll only slow you two down at the airship with all the checks.”

“Okay,” Ruby nodded, looking at her sister with a nervous smile, “Do I look okay?”

“You look like Ruby Rose, so I’d say that’s fine,” Yang teasingly ruffled Ruby’s hair before reaching and pulling the door open, “Let’s go, slowpoke.”

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Ruby’s heart was hammering in her throat as she straightened herself up, picking off stray rose petals and sweeping off dust as she paced through pristine, clean-smelling halls. People came and went on their own business, some dressed in uniforms of the hospital and others were simply patients or visitors. She’d been met by a nurse at the reception desk, who’d told her that she’d be escorting Ruby towards the room she was going to meet the head surgeon in. Vale National Hospital was massive, but the nurses had no issue traversing it. Ruby probably would’ve gotten lost walking around by herself.

“Just in here, Ruby,” The escorting nurse, opening a door on the edge of the corridor that led to a bigger, wider office. Ruby gulped, thanking the lady quietly. She straightened her cloak some more before she dipped into the room, eyes landing on shelf-covered walls. Folders and binders bulged from the shelves, dating back decades. Other various nick-nacks were posted about too, such as an old Grimm toy on a shelf, and a photo of a woman and child. The room was dull though, with a gray loomy paint on the walls and an all-too sweet green on the roof. Why was it that doctors' offices were always so dreer and ominous? Why couldn’t they be bright colors, full of motivational slogans and weapon diagrams and pictures of grimm? If Ruby was a doctor, that’s what her office would look like, not this desolate, haunted place.

Weiss’s surgeon and head doctor of the hospital is sitting at an oversized oak desk that was surprisingly clean. A monitor sat just to his left. Ruby recognised the blue hologram type to be one of the older kinds, but then again Beacon had some of the most modern tech available on the market. Some hardback files were laying at the foot of the oak legs, held together with a few colorful rubber bands. The only other file on the desk was the open one under his hand, which Ruby quickly figured belonged to her partner. Ruby could make out x-ray pictures underneath the hefty pile of notes, but no details.

“Ah, finally you made it,” The man greeted, standing and reaching out his arm to shake Ruby’s hand. Ruby stiffened slightly, unfamiliar with the professional gesture. It felt all so cliché and fake, like she’d wake up any moment and find herself watching one of those dramas Yang always barked on about.

“Sorry I’m late.” Ruby said, awkwardly reaching out and giving what she thought was a decently firm handshake. He smiled tiredly at her, murky darkness below his eyes revealing just how tired and overworked the poor doctor was.

“Not to worry, Miss Rose. My name’s Dr. Bui,” he introduced. He had a small, round face, worn down by the effects of his work through the years, with a tall, lanky body and strong hands. He had a pair of reading glasses tucked onto the collar of his tunic, held on by one of those strings Ruby always saw old people use. If unthreatening was a person, Dr. Bui would be him. “Please, sit.”

The man gestured to one of the two plush office chairs sitting opposite him. Ruby graciously took one of them while Dr. Bui sat down and organized himself. He plucked his glasses from his collar and unfolded them, placing them over his eyes. Ruby watched in awe as a holographic interface lit up on them.

“Miss Schnee, I’m told you’ve met Miss Rose before?”

A holographic video began to play on the bigger monitor of Winter Schnee as Dr. Bui began to talk to her. Ruby instantly sat straighter under the gaze of Winter, pulling her shoulders back. It was dark in Atlas. Winter was sitting in front of a massive window, one that showed the entire city and it’s lights behind her. Ruby couldn’t make out many details in the low quality resolution, but for what it was it was beautiful. Winter sat like a pedestal in the middle of the screen, her army uniform tidy and her hair combed clean. Ruby thought she could make out tired eye bags on Winter too.

“Indeed.”

“Then let’s waste no more time,” Bui smiled, carefully flipping to the next page in Weiss’s file and pulling out a long printed out email covered in small letters and titles, “The samples you found on the site were used to help bioengineer a cure, as I’m sure you’re aware, Miss Schnee. What you found was invaluable to aiding us in creating a cure for your sister.”

“I’m glad we found something of use, Doctor.”

“I know I referred to the result as a cure before, however, the word ‘cure’ is more of a fancy font plastered onto it. We essentially recreated a sample of what your sister’s captors used on her, and tried to reverse bioengineer a suitable result that would nullify the effects of the dust in her bloodstream,” The man held up the sheet of paper to the camera, “We couldn’t carry out exact tests, as we don’t produce pure dust nor can we import it, but the tests we did carry out yield some promising results.

The primary issue remains that because of the lack of research relating to purified dust, we can’t be sure of some of the exact reactions and the differences that may occur from refined dust, but many of our results demonstrated the disintegration and destion dust in rodents after several doses, who continued to heal and survive, although with some side effects.”

Ruby frowned, anxiety beginning to dance in her chest to the rhythm of her heart, “Side effects?”

Dr. Bui hesitated, turning the page in his hand as his AR glasses scanned the papers. The grim look on his face set butterflies scattering in Ruby’s guts. That wasn’t a good face.

Dr. Bui took a heavy, heaving breath, and sighed, “We found that the rodents contracted partial paraplegia that progressed to full symptoms after extended and increased exposure to the drug. It wasn’t diagnosed one hundred percent of the time, but the percentage diagnosed was in the high ninety’s.”

Winter’s stoic expression shifted to one of disappointment and guilt, her brows creasing into a fine crease. Ruby, lost in the language, shifted nervously at Winter’s reaction. She didn’t want to know, but... “What’s partial paraplegia...?”

“It’s... a term we use for paralysis of the lower body, so the feet, toes, legs and possibly her lower abdomen, “ The man explained solemnly, wringing his hands together, “Weiss would need to be fitted for leg braces, or a wheelchair, depending on her choice, and of course her financial availability.”

Ruby’s stomach fell through her, taking her heart with it as it plunged into the icy depths of hell. That meant Weiss wouldn’t be able to walk again, not without some kind of support or brace that would support her. That would impact everything: her independence, her future, her dream... Ruby’s eyes grew cloudy and damp as she debated the thought, holding her head in her hands. This was her fault, this was all her fault...

“Would Weiss be able to continue her huntress training?” Winter asked calmly, picking back up the pieces of her composure with practiced timing.

“She might,” The man explained, “The paraplegia won’t be immediate, but it will start to take effect within a few of the booster injections. If Miss Schnee could learn to operate fully with her braces before it fully set in, I believe she might have a chance at regaining her prior skills. Otherwise, she may have to consider early retirement from her huntsman career.”

Ruby held back tears, jamming her thumbs into her tear ducts as she took a hazy breath. She could still fix her mistakes and help her partner. Weiss was stubborn at the worst of times, she wouldn’t give up that easily. Or... would she? Weiss’s intense stubbornness had been absent since she’d woken up, locked away with the rest of the parts of her that didn’t come back. Would this Weiss be willing to go through it all again? Ruby wasn’t sure, but she sure wasn’t going to just let the chance slip away. Not all hope was lost yet. She sat back straight, looking at Dr. Bui, “How long would she have?”

The man thought for a moment, “Well, as soon as Miss Winter Schnee signs off on it, we can start administering the samples. Then twice a week until her dust collection dissipates completely. Maybe two, three months until full paraplegia? It will be hard to tell, especially as we don’t know the rate of acceleration with pure dust versus refined dust.”

Ruby slouched back in the chair, her hands clenching the tattered corner of her cape. Two months. That was so little time.

“Does my sister know about these side effects?” Winter asked, drawing Ruby’s attention back to the specialist waiting on the screen.

“I informed her this morning, but she asked that I give her some time to think it over.”

“What if she didn’t take the cure?” Ruby asked meekly, trying desperately to find a way around the life Weiss would be tied to. “She’d be able to walk still, right?”

“The dust in her body continues to spread and pool at certain junctures in her body,” Dr. Bui explained calmly, “If we were to abandon the cure and leave her as she was, the dust particles would take over her bloodstream and theoretically they could solidify. She could have a heart attack, or lose multiple limbs as a result.”

Ruby slumped back in defeat, eyes staring hollowly at the marked edge of the desk, “So it’s between bad and worse...”

Dr. Bui frowned in sympathy, “I’m sorry. We did try everything we could, but we simply didn’t have enough time. If we leave her any longer, we risk further injury. I’d suggest starting almost immediately.”

The room fell silent for what felt like forever. Ruby’s throat tightened almost painfully, her vision blurry as tears pooled on the edge of her eyelids. No matter what they did, or how many steps they took forward, they always seemed to be thrown back to the gutters. Ruby didn’t know if Weiss would be able to overcome the paralysis in time before it fully set in. She couldn’t bear the thought of having to replace her partner not after everything they’d gone through. Weiss and Ruby had a bond that she had never felt before. Weiss would be sent back to Atlas to live with her abusive parents, and Ruby would never see her again.

If Winter was feeling as tormented as Ruby was, she didn’t show it. The older Schnee let out a long, tired sigh, pinching sleep from her eyes, “Go ahead and start treatment as soon as you can. If we can prevent the worst from happening, we need to start as soon as possible. Send all payments to the Schnee Family.”

“Right away, Miss Schnee,” Dr. Bui turned to a printer stashed behind him and turned it on with a hollow beep, drawing Ruby from her mentally absent spiral. She stood up, wiping her eyes clear and clearing her throat.

“I’m, um, going to go now,” She croaked, pointing to the door, “Thanks for, uh, inviting me? Yeah.”

The doctor frowned slightly as Ruby made way to the door, biting down on her tongue sharply to stop the building pressure in her head. She just had to make it somewhere where it would be less embarrassing when she started to cry. She was fast, she could get out.

“Miss Rose, would you like me to escort you back down?”

Ruby groaned in her head, swallowing the ball in her throat, “N-no! It’s okay. I memorized it on the way up.” She pointed to her head, forcing a watery smile, “Leader memory, y’know?”

That was a big fat lie, but all she needed to do was find an elevator and go down. Dr. Bui didn’t look convinced, but he didn’t try to stop her. With a bow of his head, Ruby flipped up her hood, opened the door, and vanished. Then she started to run.

Ruby ran fast and hard, tears blurring her pathway as she weaved and bobbed between nurses and patients in the hall. Shouts of warning came as the little red, flowery tornado ripped through the hospital. Ruby only faintly followed the directions, doing loops until finally, *finally* she found an empty stairwell that led down.

She was fully out of breath by the time she reached the outside, stopping on the last stair to catch herself on the railing as her aura gave a weak flash of warning. Her face was wet and cold as she wheezed, her legs falling from under her as she collapsed into a seated position on the cold, terracotta steps. The sunlight was warm on her face, the water in her mouth salty. She needed to breathe, just *breathe*...

“Rubes?”

Ruby sucked in a breath sharply, her ribs twinging with the sudden gasp. She didn’t have to look far over her shoulder to recognise the boots and purple scarf tied to her leg of her sibling. Yang sat down beside her with a grunt, planting her hands on her knees as she got comfy.

“I thought that was you,” she cooed softly, her shoulder brushing off Ruby’s in a comforting way. Ruby gripped her skirt with her fists, drawing her knees together. If she could, she’d just disappear under her hood. Maybe if she disappeared all this bad stuff wouldn’t happen to Weiss.

“I take it didn’t go well, then?” Yang asked carefully. Ruby’s throat tightened with a fresh grip, squeezing all her emotions out like a sponge. She shook her head.

“Weiss... Weiss is gonna become paralysed...” Ruby stammered, trying to keep her sentences level but failing as her voice cracked. “She’s gonna lose her legs, Yang... she can’t- she won’t...”

Yang’s face fell as Ruby leaned into her, seeking the warmth only her sister seemed to emanate. The tears were coming freely now, falling like thick splashes of paint onto the red stone below them. She didn’t try to stop the sob that broke through her throat either, which just broke the barrier. Yang’s arms were around her in a heartbeat.

“Hey... It’ll be okay... We’ll... We’ll figure something out,” Yang tried, but there was a heavy worry in her voice. What could they do, but sit and watch? Like they had been doing for a month, and just pray that whatever miracle Weiss had been hanging onto didn’t burn out in the sky. Ruby buried her head into Yang’s chest, curling into her sister’s body desperately.

“What if... She might not... I don’t want another teammate, Yang... I don’t...”

“Shh, shh,” Yang whispered, resting her jaw on the crown of Ruby’s head as her baby sister jerked in her arms, “Deep breaths, okay? Just like Blake taught you.”

“I can’t lose her...” Ruby croaked. Yang hummed, tightening her hug.

“We won’t. I promise you we won’t.”

“She’ll be sent back to Atlas. I’ll never see her again...”

Yang lifted her head off Ruby’s, wiping a tear from her sister’s small face with her thumb. Yang almost felt as if she was transported back to their home in Patch, when Yang had to help a younger Ruby Rose after the death of their mom. She frowned.

“Is there anything we can do? To stop it?”

Ruby sniffed, pulling her head away from Yang slowly and wiping her nose off the back of her hand, “I... I don’t know. The doctor said she’d have two months until she’s fully paralysed b-but...”

Yang sat and thought, crossing her legs, “Two months, huh? That’s what, eight weeks?”

“Y-yeah. He said- that- um- Weiss could probably be fitted with braces or something.”

“Eight weeks to get used to braces then, seven if they take a week to be made,” Yang planted her hand on Ruby’s shoulder, giving a comforting squeeze of assurance and a soft smile, “Ruby, I’ve seen you do so much in eight weeks. You know what we did in eight weeks?”

Ruby frowned, puzzled, “W-what?”

“You made Crescent Rose in three weeks,” Yang started, pulling out a hand and starting to count with her fingers, “We raided a White Fang base that was underground and stopped a massive scheme to destroy Vale in one week.”

“That was an accident-”

“We perfected our team combos in like, two weeks.”

“Yeah...”

“You completed your signal mission exams a whole three days earlier than everyone else.”

“That’s because Uncle Qrow taught me tricks...”

Yang rolled her eyes playfully, “Ruby, I’ve seen you do amazing things in a shorter time than seven, eight weeks. If anyone can help Weiss recover, it’s you.”

Ruby wiped the dried tears from her face with her thumb, eyes locked to a single crack in the stone brick behind Yang, “But what if I can’t? What if-”

“Ah- ah- ah-” Yang cut in, “‘What if’s’ never got you nowhere, little sis’.”

Ruby huffed, “You’re such a butt.”

“I’m a handsome one, though, right?” Yang teased, flexing her arms around her head to show off her muscles. Ruby rolled her eyes dramatically, shoving her sister with all she had.

“You’re an annoying one!”

“You’re just jealous.”

Ruby giggled, snuffling up the last of her running nose before pulling her hood down. Yang was right. Eight weeks was a long time, and Ruby had done stuff in a much shorter amount of time when she put her mind to it. She could do this. She had to, for Weiss.

“Better?” Yang asked, leaning into Ruby’s distant gaze. The rose looked up with a smile.

“Better.”

“You’re welcome,” Yang beamed, hopping back up to her feet. She turned and held out both her hands for Ruby to grab onto and pulled Ruby to her feet too. Once they were both up, Yang reached and ruffled Ruby’s hair. “No more Mr. Negative up there, alright? You tell him to f-off whenever he comes.”

Ruby fake gasped, “*Swear!*”

“The letter ‘f’ is not a swear word, your honor!”

“You meant something else though!”

“Nu-uh-”

“Yes you did! What else does it mean?”

“Easy, it means... uh... f-o away.”

“Yang!”

Chapter 17 (4.8k)

‘Before’

Being in this hospital was doing mean things to Weiss's mental health.

Not that she'd expected it to be good after her incident. Oh, no she thought she'd never have a sane strip of her mind left at some points of her kidnapping. Whilst she was on medication for the PTSD and depressive episodes that all but consumed her, she couldn't help but become antsy and nervous and desperate for a distraction so that she wouldn't bore holes into her arms with her stares.

The one thing she hated out of everything so far, though, was by far the silence.

It was strange to believe that before everything, she would seek it out intensely, and she'd often pity Blake for the multiplied hearing she'd had to deal with on a daily basis. Weiss used to enjoy hiding out alone in a hidden cozy room in the library, studying and reading up on topics she wasn't familiar with, or faunus history which she'd picked up on in the months leading up to everything. She'd enjoyed it, maybe even flourished in it.

Now, it petrified her.

Though, the thought of calling her teammates kept her isolated in it.

It was almost funny, how during everything, the one thing that had come back in a foggy memory was her constant will to be with her team again, to hear her partner's voices just talking to her. She hated the silence that greeted her, the voices and tricks in her mind that would undermine and drag her through hell. It was a deafening void that only fed into her anxiety, and her mind and soul ate at it hungrily. She was constantly on edge, waiting for someone to burst through the door and drag her back to hell, or for the pink haired girl to return to finish toying with Weiss's mind. She always felt like she was waiting. That the silence was always before the storm.

Perhaps it was that that kept Weiss from reaching out to her teammates. Neo had all but broken her sanity, and by the gods had she broken everything else Weiss had. It all started with silence, and ended with Weiss in more pain than she could possibly put into words. She'd tried to explain it, what it was like from the few flashes her body allowed her to see, but it was too much. Even a glimpse into that world made her body shake and her chest heave in panic.

Weiss's therapists told her to reach out for older and fonder memories, to try and starve off the new ones. She spent many of her days in the silence doing that, sifting past the murky darkness of the last few months and instead to the fresher, clearer ones in the deepest locks of her mind. Some of them came easily, her early days in Beacon with team RWBY, flashes of fights with Ruby and Yang. She tried to stay away from the thoughts of Torchwick.

Key memories only, as her therapist called it.

It helped that her physiologist had a memory blocking semblance. Though he couldn't read them, he had the ability to stop any access to certain memories he, or more likely his subject, wanted. It wasn't a permanent solution, but it was enough to allow Weiss the time to think on more important things. More immediate things.

She glanced down at her weakening legs in distaste.

She was due to have her implants surgery done within the next week, and the booster injections soon thereafter. She hadn't really needed to think long about the concept of taking the robotic implants to allow her to keep walking. She had no plans to become a wasteless sack at the SDC, confined to a wheelchair for the rest of her life doing desk work only. The SDC legacy was hers to control, and so she will do it as a Huntress. A huntress, maybe, that might never get her past the C-ranking list, but a huntress all the same. All she needed was to not hold team RWBY back, just get to graduation, where they could take A-list positions, maybe even S. Whatever happened, as long as they got free, they would be fine.

Even if it meant replacing her as a team member.

She'd juggled that idea a lot. According to her sister, after she started the injection treatments, she wouldn't have long before she had full paralysis in her legs. Weiss doubted she'd be able to gain full motor control with the implants within the few weeks she had, especially given even if she had the braces, the rest of her body was nowhere near combat performance. She'd hold everyone back, especially her team. Weiss didn't want to be the rock that dragged them all under the water and drowned their hopes. If she couldn't improve at the end of the semester, she will going to ask Ozpin to replace her in the team.

The guilt that plagued her conscience was heavy though. As much as she loved and cherished the team, she just couldn't find a way to fully let her guard down around them. The longer she stayed, the more she expected those heterochromatic eyes to replace warm silver or gold, or for Yang to reach forward and grab her by the throat. Winter had offered more than once to transfer her to a hospital in Atlas, where Weiss could be closer to her older sister. Where Winter could protect her. Where her father could monitor her and make sure she didn't ruin the family name.

Weiss sighed, sinking deeper into her pillows. She just didn't know anymore.

She looked down at her arms, covered by a new pressure bandage that covered any immediate cream wraps on her skin. It covered her entire torso and half her neck, with gaps open along her hips and her chest for breathing room. It kept a lot of the swelling down, and encouraged blood flow to all of her scarred areas. Similar treatment was given to burn victims, according to any research Weiss had done. She'd have to wear it for the rest of her life.

She breathed slowly, letting her head sink into the overly soft pillow beneath her head as she fished for another memory to keep her company. She closed her eyes, and quickly found herself drifting off to sleep again.

When Weiss wakes again, she immediately knows Ruby isn't in the dorm.

The dorm room is freezing, breath pooling in front of her mouth in puffs of white cloud as she breathed. Weiss let out a tired groan, curling deeper beneath the warmth of her duvet. The air was chilled on her shoulders, goosebumps erecting along her skin that spread down her back like icy water. Her pillow beneath her was warm, and for a moment she almost just debated going back to sleep.

Reluctantly, she peeled her only source of warmth off, instantaneously missing the heat it offered. She lifted her hands to rub consciously at her exposed arms, noticing the open dorm window blowing frosty, damp air in on top of them all. Her eyes landed on her combat uniform coat hung off the bedpost by the foot of her bed. It didn't offer as much warmth as she would've liked, but it would do.

Pulling the jacket over her arms, she chanced a glance over to Yang and Blake's bed, not expecting either of them to be awake at such a heinous hour. Yang wasn't, in fact, the brute was huddled in a bundle of her own under her sheets, her golden mane emitting a soft glow as her hair kept her warm.

Weiss couldn't help the slight jerk of jealousy that spiked through her. How unfair it was that Yang's own hair could act as a heater, while the rest of them had to freeze in the night wind. She expected Blake to be almost snug against her partner in the head; instead, she found sharp golden eyes glowing at her in the dark, hidden beneath the heavy sheets of the lower bunk. Weiss started back in surprise, but doesn't hold back the low sigh that comes after.

"Blake, why are you awake?" Weiss whispered harshly, although there was really no reason to. Yang tended to sleep like a log, and judging by the angle her body was pinned in, tonight was no different.

The feline pushed her head further out from below the blanket, a shadow moving in the darkness. Her ears popped out from just underneath the sheets, though Weiss could see the earplugs she'd put in them to try and drown out Yang's snoring. Weiss could just about make out her human ears beneath the shroud of black hair.

"Same reason you are," Blake whispered pointedly.

Weiss shifted under the feline's intense stare, looking up to the roof of the dorm as if she could see through it, "How long has she been up there?"

"Only a few minutes," Blake mumbled, glancing at the window. The panel was pushed open slightly, their red curtains swaying lightly in the night time breeze. The poster on Yang's wall fluttered in the dark slightly too, but not enough to wake her.

"...Right," Weiss rolled her eyes, holding her jacket closed over her chest and carefully climbing onto the bookshelf between the beds. She flexed her semblance, a stark white sigil forming just beyond the glass. She winced at how bright it is, hanging from the window frame for a beat, "Go back to sleep, Blake. I'll talk to her."

She heard the feline mumble sleepily in response before she moved, stepping out onto her platform and pushing over the window as she passed through it, careful not to catch it and lock herself out.

She scaled the side of the dorm house building quickly, shivering as her bare foot reached the cold, damp, slated roof tiles. The stars above her twinkled innocently in the cloudless sky, illuminated by the shattered moon. Weiss took a shivery breath, stiffening her body as she looked around the dorm building. It was hard to see in the dark, but she didn't need to look far to find who she was looking for.

"Ruby."

The girl in question jerked in surprise, her old, dingy red cape falling off her head and onto her shoulders as startled starlight eyes pin Weiss to the roof. Ruby's mouth opened and closed a few times in shock and a half-baked noises coming from her throat as she tried to formulate a sentence. She looked like a deer caught in the headlights.

"W-Weiss! I can explain-"

"Before you start, I'm not mad at you," Weiss immediately pulled the brakes on the incoming ramble with a raised hand, moving carefully to be closer to her stunned partner. Ruby looked small out here alone on the roof, curled in a ball beneath the red of her cloak. She looked like a lost child, stuck in an estranged world beneath the stars.

Weiss has caught her out here once before, to star gaze during a meteor shower, but Weiss wasn't dense. Despite her... less than ideal attitude sometimes, she could still notice when something was gnawing on the mind of her friend.

Ruby had tried to hide it, just like she had tried to sneak out of the dorm on her own. In retrospect, she probably wanted to be alone, but Weiss wouldn't allow that. She'd grown up alone, and she knew how it felt. She didn't wish it on anybody.

After a moment of silence, Weiss sighed heavily and moved to sit down beside Ruby. She could feel her partner's wide eyes staring at her as she sat, but it didn't stop her. Weiss allowed herself a moment to get comfortable on the slated tiles, drawing her legs to her chest in an attempt to keep her small figure warm in the cold air, "It's cold out here."

Ruby lingered on the heir with astonished eyes for a moment longer, as if trying to decide something in her mind, before relenting. She held one of her own rose petals in her hand, stroking the flat of it absentmindedly as she thought, "Yeah."

The two sat in a rift of silence, each curling their knees to their chest as they watched the shifting skies above them. Far over the water, the sky was starting to lighten, painting an underglow to the looming clouds. It didn't take long for the shivers to crawl under Weiss's skin, her jaw rattling softly as she gazed over the courtyards.

Ruby beside her began to squirm under the tension of the scene, dragging her feet closer to her chest, "The sky's, um, nice..."

Weiss sighed, settling forward a bit more to warm up again, "Ruby, why are you out here?"

Ruby pondered the question, her gaze locked to her feet as if they were the most interesting things in the world, "Um, stargazing?"

"Don't lie to me." Weiss immediately scolded, her eyebrows drawing together in a scowl. "I know that you've been out here more than once this week. You're not fooling anyone, nor are you the sneakiest."

Ruby pouted, resting her chin on her arms and staring into the distance, "You noticed, huh?"

"Yes," Weiss sighed, "Blake has too. We're worried about you. I'd expect Blake to be the one sneaking around at night, not you."

Weiss's chest tightened when Ruby let out a weak laugh, her fists clenching around her cape, "I thought I was doing a pretty good job at hiding it."

"What's wrong, Ruby? You can talk to me," Weiss shifted closer to Ruby's side, brushing her shoulder off her partner's, "I know that I still come across as... difficult at times, but I *am* trying. I do care for your well wellbeing. You're my partner."

Ruby took a long slow breath and leaned over so that she plopped childishly against Weiss's exposed shoulder, shuffling into her limited warmth. Weiss froze slightly, uncomfortably unfamiliar to physical contact. Her skin immediately began to itch with a need to pull away, but she forced herself to remain.

"I'm just... I don't know." Ruby sounded drained, her brows furrowing as she gazed away, "I thought being a leader would be more fun and not this... blegh."

Weiss frowned, glancing down at the brunette on her shoulder, "Being a leader is more than just the title, Ruby."

"I know that," Ruby protested loudly, throwing her hands forward as she sat straight again, "I should've expected that! But I skipped the whole leadership program in Signal. I didn't expect to be here, y'know? I just thought, 'hey, I don't need to know anything about this stuff yet! I'll catch up next year or in Summer School or something.'"

The heiress hummed, turning to gaze over the courtyard as she listened. It was easy to forget that because Ruby had arrived at Beacon early, she'd miss some of the curriculum required in it. Weiss remembered covering it during her private tutoring lessons, but it had been some of the last topics that were covered on the timetable. Leadership skills were appended throughout the graduation years of the hunting schools as students got more mature and more mentally capable for the title. Of course, Ruby had missed that. But, still, "I think you've held the team together well so far."

"Yeah, but," Ruby shifted to look at her partner, "Why *me*? Why didn't you, or Yang, or even Blake get this? You would've been ten times better than... this." She gestured to herself. "Yang, maybe not as much actually, but she'd still probably do better than whatever I'll turn out to be. And Blake? Blake's practically a ninja! Of course she'd be good at this kind of thing."

Weiss thought back to the conversation she had with Professor Port about this topic not long after Ruby had been appointed. She'd been so bitter about it, about being shown up by a fifteen year old who'd she had to save due to her own negligence. To Weiss, Ruby had seemed so childish and inexperienced, someone who had no chance of looking after themselves, nevermind three others.

Weiss had trained, and trained hard, to uphold her family legacy of being a leader. Winter was second-in-command, a leader of almost every atlesian troop there was, her Father led the SDC, the world's biggest dust trading company, her mother led the biggest exotic gallery across Atlas and Vale. Yet here was Weiss, unable to lead a team of two misfits and a faunus. How could Ruby, the exception to the rule with no experience, have become a leader, and not Weiss?

Well, the answer was obvious.

"Because you're you, Ruby." Weiss replied simply, shrugging as if it was the most obvious answer in the world.

"See! That's what I mean. Maybe we could go to Ozpin and convince him to rename the team in your name instead, or- Wait." Ruby, who'd gotten so caught up in her own ramblings that she was already on her feet and headed towards the head office, turned and stared at her, lost, "...Wha?"

Weiss took a long breath, tucking her bangs behind her ear, "You were chosen as leader exactly because you never did those things. You bring a different viewpoint into battles, inexperienced perhaps, but fresh and unique. You don't follow everything by the book. That's where I would've fallen."

Ruby stared back at her like a deer caught in headlights, blinking furiously as her brain finally began to catch up with the world, "But..."

"Yang could never make a good leader. She's far too brash and foolhardy to do that. She is a tank-styled huntress, meaning strategy is not her strongest quality. She would get us killed in the field," Weiss continued, counting the fingers down on her hands, "And Blake is a lone wolf figure, the stealth-styled in our team. She would never be able to send orders, but she can certainly follow them flawlessly. I am a support class, since I cannot deal as much physical damage as the three of you, but my glyphs can aid in boosting your output. That just leaves *you*."

Ruby followed with a spark in her eye, the terminology familiar but not for the right reasons, "I'd be the all-rounder right? A bit of everything. Like, a trump card?" She bounced on the balls of her feet with a childish excitement, "It's like Ultimate Ninja Kaiden Grimm Fighter 7. You have the tanks, the supports, the damage dealers and then you have the big bosses which are like combinations of all three. Like, Kaijen, who-"

"Ruby, you're missing the point," Weiss grumbled, her eye twitching. "I was trying to say that you are the strategist, and yes, the 'all-rounder', if that's how you want to categorize it. It has nothing to do with your computer games."

"Oh, right," Ruby stopped rambling, rubbing at the nape of her neck awkwardly, "Sorry. But, uhm, even in Ultimate Ninja Kaiden Grimm Fighter 7, those kinds of roles aren't just on one person. It's... a lot. Kinda."

Weiss sighed, standing back up and dusting off her night dress, "You can always share your responsibilities with us. We're your team, like it or not. And your team is like family. I'm always willing to help where I can. I promised that, and I never break a promise."

The starry eyed look Ruby sent to her made Weiss's stomach curl into itself in a strange way, the itchiness under her skin returning in its full angry force. She looked away defiantly, folding her arms tightly over her chest. Why did she say that? She didn't have to liken it to a family, that was just getting Ruby's hopes up-

She peered through an eye back towards the rose, finding that the girl had shuffled closer nervously and was half heartedly holding her arms out. There was a sheepish look in her eyes and words on the tip of her tongue that she was too shy to say, but her eyes spoke volumes.

Weiss begrudgingly let out a groan, "Do you want a hug, Ruby?"

"Um, yes?"

Weiss sighed, unfolding herself and holding out her arms, "Fine. Come here then!"

Weiss's chest thumped with the force at which Ruby latched onto her, feeling the younger girl's fingers dig into the top of her back. Ruby's face was pressed tight into the crook of Weiss's shoulder, breathing heavily into it. Weiss's face turned various shades of red as she began to stutter incredulously, her eyes blown wide and her hands hovering in mid air behind her.

"Thank you," Ruby whispered honestly into her neck, her voice heavy with appreciation. Weiss pressed her lips tight together, robotically drawing in her hands and patting Ruby on the back with all the grace of a blind acrobat.

"You're, uhm... You're welcome."

.

"Do you think I could fit an entire orange in my mouth?" Yang asked a loud, throwing said orange and catching it mid air mindlessly as she hung upside off her bed. To Yang, it seemed like the only important question right now as she studied the coloured fruit. To Weiss, it was the ninth annoying question within the last twenty minutes.

"If it shuts you up, be my guest," the Schnee grumbled from her desk, recategorizing all her notes back into the binder Ruby had stolen from her, and updating any she felt was inadequate. The blonde behind her let out an unsatisfied hum of thought, bouncing the orange off the roof again. Weiss had found that Professor Peach was out on a hunting trip with some other first years for the week, which meant that she had to spend three hours listening to Yang alone in their dorm. Ruby and Blake had weapon mechanics during the time Weiss and Yang had their geology and greater mythology classes.

Weiss had been hoping to get some organization work done before the term projects came in and ultimately took any of the free time she had left away. Yang, as always, had other intentions.

"But, how would I chew it? I could probably swallow it whole if I tried."

"Use your teeth, or just eat it like a sane human being."

"But there's no adventure in that!"

Weiss sighed heavily, "Why do you need adventure in everything you do?"

Yang let out a snort, rolling onto her stomach to glance down at the younger girl, “Uh, duh? We’re huntresses, we need action in our everyday diet!”

Weiss scowled at her over her shoulder, “Then go to the training arena and leave me alone.”

Yang pouted, letting out a harsh sigh as she let her arms fall limp either side of her, “And what, punch the wall by myself?”

Weiss pinched the bridge of her nose in frustration. Gods, why were the Rose-Xiao Long sisters so desperate to get on her nerves? If they weren’t asking pointless stupid questions they were doing pointless stupid things that more often than not got the whole team into trouble. Why couldn’t she just have had a normal team with normal people who didn’t make it their task to annoy her daily?

“Yang,” Weiss sat back in her chair, turning fully to face the brute behind her, “Why can’t you just have a normal conversation with me, and not one that involves fruitless topics such as these?”

Yang grinned sleazily at her. Weiss immediately regretted her poor phrasing.

“I dunno, these seem pretty... fruitful, to me!” She squeezed the orange.

Weiss groaned again.

Yang chuckled to herself, sliding off the bed and crawling back onto her feet with a thump. Finally, she dug her nails into the orange skin, starting to peel it off. As she did, she wandered over to Weiss’s desk and peered over her shoulder, as in investigating her work. Weiss felt something crawl down her back.

“Can I help you?”

“So, random question...”

Weiss rolled her eyes, “Yang, everything you ask is a random question.”

“True... but!” Yang hopped up onto the wooden desk, pulling her leg up to her chest for her to hug. Weiss gave up on her task then, raising her hands in defeat and letting them fall to her lap. She leaned back in the wooden chair, fully expecting another question akin to her previous ones.

Instead, Yang got a serious look on her face, “Are you straight?”

Weiss’s jaw hung slightly, caught off guard from the sudden seriousness of the question. She let out a nervous chuckle, crossing her legs and folding her arms, “Why are you suddenly asking?”

Yang squinted at her, lilac eyes looking her up and down, “So, that’s a no.”

“What?!” Weiss squawked, shooting upright in her spot, earning an amused look from the blonde, “Well- I- I’m not... Why are you even asking this?”

Yang laughed warmly, patting Weiss on the shoulder in support, “Just... doing some research. You’re open to both?”

Weiss held her cold hands to her face, covering the heat that had rushed to it, “Well, I- I don’t know. I never gave it much thought.”

Yang nodded wisely, leaning off of the table and back to her feet, “That’s expected. I mean, we’ve been busy. Here, let me break it down a bit more.” She made a motion with her hands, making a ring with one hand and pointing her index on the other. Weiss turned deeper red.

“Would you prefer a guy or a gal?”

“Yang! That’s!- I’m not gonna share that with you!” Weiss screamed, covering her whole face. Yang didn’t laugh, watching her curiously as the heiress panicked. It was interesting to watch as her walls crumbled like that. Gone was the prestigious heir, reduced back to a teenage girl.

“I can share mine, then we’ll be even,” Yang shrugged, leaning against the wall by the door, “I’m a little bit of both, but I prefer women. Women with extra assets, if you get my drift.”

Weiss is practically steaming, embarrassment and humiliation hot on her entire body. Is this a normal conversation with people her age? She understood she might be a little bit estranged with social interaction, but this was...

Yang seemed hardly affected by the topic, and it raised Weiss’s suspicions. Was she doing recon of some kind? Was... was Yang interested in her? Weiss somehow doubted that, but she couldn’t just fully deny it. She never paid attention to that kind of stuff, Weiss didn’t even know it was on most huntresses radar at this age. Like, obviously she’d have thought about it later in life, but, now? In a dorm, alone with Yang?

For the next few hours...

“Yang... you’re not... uh,” Weiss peaked through her fingers. Yang was looking back at her, not catching onto Weiss’s flustered train of thought. The Schnee cleared her throat, looking away, “I’m, um, not... interested, in that... uh...”

Yang continued to stare blankly, before finally, after a lifetime for the crimson faced girl in front of her, it clicked. Yang spluttered back to life, turning a similar shade of red as her sister's cloak. “Oh! Oh, no! No no no no! No, I’m not interested in you in that way either! Oh, god ew, no. You’re like a sister to me, eugh, ew that’s gross, no.”

Weiss breathed in relief, “Oh thank gods. I was... no,”

“Would you hate it though?” Yang asked curiously, “If a girl did want to sleep with you?”

Weiss sighed. She wasn’t going to avoid this conversation even if she threatened Yang off with a hot iron. “Well, no, I don’t know... I wouldn’t know what to do...”

“Yeah, you sound like you wouldn’t know what to do even if you were given a manual,” Yang chuckled, “You’re too mushy.”

“You sound like you’re hiding something...” Weiss mumbled, narrowing her eyes.

Yang chuckled nervously, rubbing at her neck, “No, gods. I was asking for someone else, not me. I just had to make sure it wasn’t a fruitless effort on their behalf.”

Oh, so someone else wanted to sleep with her. Yeah that wouldn’t haunt her mind.

“Who else, so I can avoid them,” Weiss asked, rubbing at her forearms. A look flashed across Yang’s eyes then, something Weiss didn’t recognise, but she definitely noticed it. Was it anger? Maybe a form of it?

“I’ll let them tell you themselves, when they’re ready,” Yang said carefully, folding her arms, “Just be nice when they do.”

Weiss narrowed her eyes. So Yang knew them personally, then. She never got prickly like that when she would refer to strangers. Weiss relented, sighing out some of the heat in her face.

“I wouldn’t... I mean, *I’m* willing to try. It’s just...” Weiss trailed off, rubbing at her arm anxiously. Yang pouted, already sensing the main roadblock for the heiress.

“Your father?” Yang asked, though, she already knew the answer before Weiss nodded solemnly. “Screw your father. He doesn’t get to decide who you bond with.”

Weiss’s eyes lit up for a moment, as if she was going to argue it more. Yang wouldn’t understand, even if Weiss did try and explain her father’s future plans for her. How was she going to explain being practically sold off to the highest paying suitor? That all Weiss really was a face, and that the *man* she was forced to marry would continue the powerful line of the SDC.

“It’s... It’s complicated,” Weiss sighed, “But that’s enough of this talk. The others will be back soon, and Ruby wants to do more partner training tonight. We better get our gear on.”

Yang watched sadly as Weiss closed her binder and stepped away from the table, “Weiss... You father isn’t...”

“Not-” Weiss cut the blonde off, before taking a long breath, “Not tonight, Yang.”

CHAPTER 18

“Rebirth”

How is it that, despite everything, Beacon still remained as daunting to her as it did?

Well, the amount of reporters weren't helping Weiss' situation. Even despite Yang's loud threats to literally bash them away with her fists, they crept ever closer to try and get a snap of the famed heiress returning to her huntress duties. Most of the lower class journalists had stopped following them once team RWBY had left the hospital, but some of the more... intense ones had followed them all the way to the Beacon shipyards.

“I know you said to look out for reporters, but jeez,” Yang commented, walking to Weiss' right while Blake kept watch on her left. Ruby pushed the wheelchair Weiss was currently bound to. Although her surgery had gone well, and her implants had been accepted to her body without much trouble, Weiss was still in recovery. She had been instructed not to walk full time just yet. Her body just wasn't ready for it yet.

Weiss' white knuckled grip over the pale blue blanket on her legs never relented, her eyes kept low out of habit around any media, “They're relentless sometimes. Father always had trouble with them.”

“They're assholes.”

Weiss huffed slightly in amusement, “Yes. They're assholes.”

Ruby hummed in delight, watching the interaction with a warmth in her chest. She could hardly believe that finally, *finally* they got the go ahead to bring Weiss home. After three months of tests and surgeries and even more tests, she could finally come back to them and they could finally go back to the way things were. Just a bunch of normal girls, with normalish lives where they'd become Huntress' and save the world.

Somewhere deep inside her, though, Ruby knew it would never be the same as it was. Nothing would really be normal again, would it? Even now, Ruby could see the way Weiss had shrunken in on herself, the way she almost shied away from everything between the guard of Blake and Yang. Her pride was smashed into billions of glass shards, so hard to regather everything that was lost between the cracks.

But damn, were they going to try.

The courtyard of the dorms wasn't too busy. Younger students went to and fro, passing glances to team RWBY as they passed but keeping their voices low as they moved on. Ruby watched as her partner's shoulders tensed and she held her breath, eyes cast up the front of the building.

“Are you okay?” Ruby asked. She didn't want Weiss to be overwhelmed on her return. The surgeons had warned them that the dust particles that couldn't be removed from her were reactant to her blood pressure. If she was stressed, or it remained too high for too long, the particles would clump and could cause trouble.

“I'm...” Weiss studied the building for a while longer, “I didn't think I could miss this rundown place.”

Blake hummed, "It does have its charms."

"It sure missed you, told me itself," Yang played, reaching under the wheels of the wheelchair and lifting it into her arms with a grunt. Weiss' arms splayed out in a panic, yelping Yang's name as the brute physically carried her up the short few steps into the building.

"There's a ramp for a reason!" Weiss scolded as she was set back down, unaffected as Yang cackled playfully. Ruby quickly reached for the handles on the chair, squeezing them tightly in nerves. Yang shrugged, grabbing the dorm building door and pushing it open, holding it as she waited.

"After you."

"Thank you."

The main lobby was primarily empty, most of the students in their morning classes. The only people that were really hanging around were staff, or cleaners. A few of them looked up and waved politely as the team reentered the building before continuing with their chores. The only strange occurrence was:

"Professor Ozpin?" Ruby asked, spotting the headmaster waiting for them by reception. The older man bowed his head politely, leaning onto his cane as he observed. He smiled down at Weiss, who couldn't help but shift slightly.

"It's good to see you again, Miss Schnee," he greeted, "How has your recovery been so far?"

Ruby noticed the way Weiss squirmed, the way her hand reached for the bandages still tightly wrapped underneath the black pressure piece she was wearing. Ruby wanted so badly to reach out and comfort her partner, but she'd been warned about that before Weiss had been sent home.

"What do you mean?" Yang asked, shifting so that she sat closer to the edge of the seat. Across from her, Weiss' therapist sighed into her knuckles, a heavy, tired thing.

"Your teammate has gone through horrendous suffering," she explained, a dark look behind her eyes, "Her brain has blotted out most of it, which is a common occurrence in trauma. There are things she could do before that she won't be comfortable doing for a long time, maybe even never."

Blake, who sat to Yang's left, frowned, "Like what?"

The lady sighed, glancing down at the papers she had laid out in front of her, "Well, to begin with, she won't be comfortable talking about her occurrences. Please refrain from asking her about what happened, no matter how curious you may be."

Ruby sighed, rubbing at her thumb. She knew that was an obvious statement, but she also knew that curiosity often got the better of people. She made a mental note to ask people that knew about the incident not to ask for details, though she hoped they had the sense not to ask anyway.

"Second," the therapist continued, "Refrain from touching her on your own volition. Throughout her time here, Miss Schnee has made it blatantly obvious that any touch is strongly unwanted, unless she initiated it herself. Let her come to you."

The three huntresses exchanged upset looks. Sure, Weiss had never wanted to be explicitly touched before, but over their time together they had started to get through to her.

“Okay,” Blake nodded, resting a gentle hand on Ruby’s knee, “We can follow that.”

“Then, otherwise, just keep an eye on her.”

“It’s been... slow,” Weiss mumbled, “But I am leagues better than I was three months ago.”

Ozpin smiled at her, “That’s good news. Please, take your time in returning to classes. I have organized some staff to bring you whatever you need, just contact reception should you know anything.”

“That’s kind of you, sir,” Blake replied, Yang and Ruby both nodding in agreement. Ozpin bowed his head, before tapping his cane off the ground idly.

“Then I must be off,” He began to pace back towards the door, waving goodbye to the girls, “I hope to see you return to classes soon, Miss Schnee. I’ll be rid of these reporters.”

“Thank you, sir,” Weiss said quietly, before the older man finally departed through the heavy oak doors.

“Huh, I didn’t expect him to be waiting for us,” Yang commented, resting her arms behind her neck as the team waited for the elevator to hit the ground floor. Beside her, Ruby hummed in thought.

“Maybe he feels partially responsible for everything?”

Weiss huffed slightly, “Or he doesn’t want to lose the favor of the SDC and our funding.”

“You send money to the schools?” Ruby asked innocently.

“We fund some of the activities. An investment, so to say. The SDC also sends dust shipments and other utilities.”

“What doesn’t the SDC have its feelers on at this point?” Yang asked, “Seems like you guys have an input in everything.”

“Not in everything,” Weiss frowned, “Just... almost everything.”

Ruby chuckled quietly under her breath.

A quiet squeak echoed throughout the RWBY dorm as the door was pushed open. Weiss stared apprehensively inside for a beat, her nails picking slightly at her skin as Yang stepped in ahead of them. It had been a long time since she’d been here, and judging by the room’s cleanliness and the fact that Ruby’s bed was made for once, it was just as big of an occasion for the others as it was for her.

“Welcome home, Ice Queen,” Yang splayed her arms out wide, “It wasn’t the same without you.”

Weiss swallowed, instead looking around the room again, eyes lingering on escapes longer than they should have, “If my absence is what makes you clean, maybe I should be gone more.”

Yang puffed, hauling herself up onto her top bunk, muscles flexing in the warm light, “Well, it’s a big occasion! Our resident icicle is home, we couldn’t just leave it dirty.”

“You would’ve needed to go back to the hospital,” Blake spoke tamely, leaving Weiss’ bag of belongings by the foot of her bed, “We’ve lived in a landfill for the past few weeks.”

“Blake! Oath of secrecy!” Yang hissed out in betrayal.

“We rolled up the carpet so that you can’t trip or anything,” Ruby pointed out, “And Yang lowered your bed a little so it’s easier to get in and out of it.”

Weiss hummed timidly, “I see. Thank you.”

“Nah, it was nothing,” Yang shrugged, watching Weiss eagerly as she looked around the room, “I don’t know if you’ll be able to use the dorm shower though, we asked but...”

“The teachers were afraid Yang would break something too valuable,” Blake finished.

Another inconvenience for her team. Weiss bit into the tip of her tongue.

“The communal showers have showers for that. I’ll just use them for a bit.”

“If you need anything changed, just let me know!” Teeth beamed down at Weiss in a grin, “Handy woman Yang’s got you covered!”

Weiss sighed under her breath, pushing herself further into her room and towards her bed, where a new scroll, Myrtenaster and her shattered glass hairpiece were laid perfectly. There wasn’t a spec of dust on Myrtenaster, and Weiss could see the fresh oil on the revolver.

She reached for her familiar weapon, only for her back to spasm and a gasp of surprise to break from her lips.

“Here,” Ruby was beside her in a heartbeat, reaching for the rapier herself and handing it over to Weiss instead, “Don’t push yourself...”

Weiss didn’t respond, reaffirming her grip on the pommel of her weapon. The cold steel against her hands was comforting, the softened calluses on her hands warping around the weapon like nothing had changed. The weight was slightly unfamiliar, her muscles withered after lack of use.

She grit her teeth, spinning the weapon and trying to hold it in the air. It shook heavily in her grasp, a glyph flickering sickly at the tip of the blade before dying. Myrtenaster fell a second later, the tip resting against her legs heavily.

The team watched on in sorrow, or grief.

Or mourning.

Gods. Was she pathetic.

“Weiss...” Blake cooed, witnessing the sorrow on her pale comrades face. Weiss didn’t respond, her eyes too focused on her trembling hands still gripping the handle.

Useless. She was useless now.

She couldn’t even hold her own weapon anymore. She wanted to weep. To curl into a corner and rot. After everything, all her training to prove her father *wrong*.

She was right back where she started.

“It’s okay,” Ruby said, somewhat trying to bring optimism back into the solemn room, “We’ll train, all of us! We’ll help you get your strength back.”

Weiss stared at her crimson partner for a while. *Do you really believe that?* “I appreciate it.”

Knock, knock.

The team looked up at the gentle rap of wood, crossing curious glances before moving to open the door. Blake was the one to reach it, while Ruby tenderly took Myrtenaster back from Weiss’ failing grip and placed it alongside the head of her bed.

“Pyrrha, Ren,” Blake greeted, pulling the door back further to allow them in. The amazonian girl and the timid boy dipped their heads in gratitude, a warm smile on their face.

“Thank you,” Pyrrha smiled, before her gaze crossed the room to the pale girl wheelchair bound beside her bed. “Weiss, it’s good to see you back.”

Weiss, meanwhile, froze up, a chill reverberating down her spine. What would Pyrrha think of her? So frail and weak.

Her fathers words haunted her, *“The weak have no place alongside the strong.”*

Despite that, she forced herself to smile, “It is nice to be back.”

Pyrrha smiled softly back at her, while Ren quietly observed, “How are you healing?”

Yang, Blake and Ruby crossed a worried look.

“I’m better, I suppose,” Weiss replied sadly, “I’m alive, that’s the important part.”

“Where’s Vomit Boy and Nora?” Yang asked, quickly eager to change the direction of the conversation before Weiss dug too deep into her own mind.

“They’re doing extra classes,” Pyrrha explained simply, “They needed a few more points to pass Plant Biology.”

“I’m so glad we didn’t take that class,” Ruby said, leaning against the post of Weiss’ bed. “Plants are so boring to learn about.”

Pyrrha chuckled warmly at the younger girls attitude, “You and Jaune share the same sentiment.” The crimsonette then turned back to Weiss. “I’m afraid we must be going, though. We just stopped by to welcome you back.”

“I appreciate it,” Weiss replied.

“I hope to see you back in class soon,” Ren said quietly, before turning and heading back through the door they had come from. Weiss took a shallow breath, the scarred injuries on her chest throbbing in protest.

“Um, here- Let me let you guys out,” Ruby piped up, quickly heading towards the door to follow the pair out.