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**Thicker than Water**

by [jws381](http://archiveofourown.org/users/jws381), [RealTerminal](http://archiveofourown.org/users/RealTerminal)

**Summary**

A magical mistake leads to an unexpected summon.

**Notes**

Beta read by CKSalamander.
Pyrrha was ready. It had taken her years - six long, painful, difficult years. Being a witch was not easy, and being a good one was even harder. She had been just fourteen years old when she made her decision. She sought out the local witch, Glynda the Good, and asked to be her apprentice. Pyrrha had some latent magical talents and a strong sense of morality, so Glynda was happy to instruct her. She proved to be a prodigy, far exceeding Glynda's expectations. In time - a much shorter time that was typical - Pyrrha would be a Master Witch herself, assuming the responsibility that came with the title.

In much of the world, witches were equal parts loved and feared. Their spells could heal the sick, protect the people from the monsters that were a constant threat, improve crop yields, and even increase fertility. Yet their powers could also be fearsome. As easily as they could create, they could destroy, if they so chose. Most commoners were happy to call upon the local witch when the need arose, but once that need was gone commoners generally preferred that the witch depart, returning to her secluded home. Being a witch was often a thankless task, a lifetime of giving and giving, only to be shunned.

Every village had its local witch. Survival demanded it. Only a Master Witch could protect a village from the roaming monsters and other threats that sought to snuff out humanity. Though long-lived, witches were not immortal. So each was expected to train an apprentice, preferably more than one, to ensure the community's continued survival. Glynda had not been the Master Witch of Patch for long, and Pyrrha was her first student. Pyrrha seemed committed to helping the people of Patch, and combined with her magical acumen, this made her the perfect candidate. But there was more motivating Pyrrha than altruism or a sense of duty.

Pyrrha had become a witch for a very specific reason. Witches had one power that no others possessed - the power to raise the dead. Only the strongest witches were capable of doing so, and even then few used the power. It violated the laws of nature, and such a violation was bound to come with dire consequences. Only in desperate times would a witch even consider taking the risk. Pyrrha was desperate. She had been when she asked Glynda to teach her in the first place. Pyrrha had been close to many deaths - death was a fact of life in small villages like Patch - and most she could accept, but there was one she could not, one death for which she felt responsible.

And so Pyrrha prepared the ritual. Years of study and training had all led to this. Glynda was away and would be in no position to stop her. She would resurrect the poor soul, and accept whatever punishment the gods saw fit. The items had been gathered, some magical charms, personal possessions of the deceased, blessed candles and incense. The potion was prepared, to be poured on the departed's personal effects at the height of the ritual.

Pyrrha began reading from the spellbook, a forbidden tome even Glynda did not dare study. She held the bottle containing the potion over the sword that represented her lost friend. Pyrrha hesitated. If she proceeded any farther, there would be no turning back. But there was never any serious doubt in her mind. She refocused on the ritual, filling her mind with memories of the departed, and poured the potion onto the blade. The sword began to glow, sparks leaping from its surface as the liquid ran across it. She spoke the final incantation.

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Bang! Whoosh!

A blinding light and a cloud of smoke obscured Pyrrha's view and suddenly a wave of pressure blasted her back. She fell, slamming back into a cabinet behind her, landing seated on the floor in a daze. That had been unexpected. Smoke filled the room and Pyrrha coughed. Forcing herself to her
feet, she pushed through the thick haze, closing on the figure that had appeared before the sword. A red glow surrounded the figure, making it just barely visible. It had worked? She was about to call his name, but something was not right. The smoke cleared further and Pyrrha found herself standing over someone entirely different from who she was expecting.

Pyrrha stared in shock at the short, nude girl that was curled up on the floor before her. After remaining motionless for a moment, the girl stirred, looking up at Pyrrha with shining silver eyes. Their eyes met and time seemed to stand still. "You're not..." Pyrrha started.

"Aaaahhhh!" The girl screamed.

"Gaaahhh!" Pyrrha screamed back.

"Wah...who are you?!" The girl demanded.

"I-I'm P-Pyrrha." Pyrrha stammered, still in shock. "Wh-who are you?"

"I'm...I'm...I have no idea." The girl replied.

"Uh...I must have messed up that spell." Pyrrha surmised. "I should send you back to wherever..."

"No, no, wait." The girl protested. "I...where am I? This place feels so...different. I...it's..."

"This village is Patch." Pyrrha explained. "You're in my attic." She paused. "Where are you from?"

"I don't know where I'm from." The girl admitted. "I just remember that it's a lot different."

"That's...strange." Pyrrha observed. "Do you know your name?"

"Uh...nope." The girl answered.

"Do you remember anything?" Pyrrha pressed.

"I remember having a mom...a mom who loves me very much...but that's it." The girl replied.

"Who is your mother?" Pyrrha asked. The girl just shrugged. "I...I...I should send you back. But I can't do that unless I know where you came from."

"I don't want to go back." The girl declared.

"Really?" Pyrrha gasped. She had summoned all manner of beings during her training. They took different forms, acted in unique ways, but were all linked by a single desire. They all wanted to return to the realm from whence they had come. That this girl...if she was really just a girl...would want to stay marked her as something very different. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I like this place." The girl confirmed. "It's warm, really warm."

"So you're from somewhere cold..." Pyrrha thought aloud.

"No, not really." The girl shook her head. "It's hard to explain. This place just feels so...warm. Can I stay here?"

"Uh...maybe...uh..." Pyrrha stalled. She had a choice to make. She could cram the girl back into whatever dimension she had come from - if she could even figure out what that was - and hide what she had done, or she could let the girl stay and face the music. Glynda was not going to be happy. When Pyrrha had brought up the idea of raising the dead, Glynda had warned her against it
in no uncertain terms. But the girl wanted to stay. "If you're going to stay...you'll need a name."

"But I don't remember my name." The girl repeated.

"Well...let's see..." Pyrrha looked at the girl, trying to come up with a name. "You glowed red when you first appeared, kind of like a...how about Ruby?"

"Ruby?" The girl asked.

"Yes, Ruby." Pyrrha nodded.

"I like it." The girl cheered.

"Okay...Ruby...let's get you some clothes." Pyrrha suggested.

"Clothes, why?" Ruby asked.

"Ruby, people wear...oh boy, I'm going to have to explain a lot, aren't I?" Pyrrha sighed. Ruby stared at her blankly. "It's going to be a long night..."

Glynda had been more busy than usual in recent weeks. One of the villagers was old and facing frequent bouts of illness. Medicine was good and all, but the villager wanted the added support of Glynda's magic. He was willing to pay, but Glynda did not do it for the money. More and more she would venture into the village, attend to the man, and return home. It was always at night. Despite all she did for the village, the inhabitants were still a bit uneasy around her, and at night she would not disturb so many of them. The man and his family were always happy to see her though, and that made it all worthwhile.

Glynda returned home tired. The sort of magic the man needed was difficult, and the late hour only added to her exhaustion. Some may have assumed witches were nocturnal, the way many magical beasts were, but that was not the case. Witches were just people who could wield magic. They dealt with the same sort of internal clock as everyone else, and when it was dark out, her body told her she should sleep. She hung her distinctive hat on a rack just inside the door and hung her coat on a hook on the wall. Pyrrha would generally be there to greet her, offering a warm smile and a hot cup of tea, but she did not appear.

Glynda guessed Pyrrha was probably asleep. It was rather late, and the training regimen Glynda was putting Pyrrha through was quite demanding. Glynda headed into the kitchen to make her own tea. As she lit the stove beneath her pot she heard a commotion upstairs. Maybe Pyrrha was not as asleep after all. "Pyrrha?" Glynda called.

"Coming!" Pyrrha yelled back. The sound of rapid footfalls accompanied Pyrrha's rush down the stairs. She slid to a stop in the doorway. "Welcome home Glynda. Sorry I didn't have your tea ready. I'm dealing with...a...uh..."

"Is this your mom?" Ruby asked, walking up behind Pyrrha.

"Oh, I didn't know we had a guest." Glynda smiled. She looked over the girl, noting her comically oversized attire. "Is she wearing your clothes?"

"Yes." Pyrrha confirmed. "She didn't have any when she arrived so..."

"Oh, is she a beggar?" Glynda asked. "Please, sit down, I'll make you some food..."
"Not exactly." Pyrrha shook her head. "You see...the thing is...I'm not exactly sure what she is." Pyrrha admitted. Glynda raised a curious eyebrow. "I was performing a ritual, and...well...it didn't go as expected. She appeared and...she doesn't want to leave."

Glynda looked at the girl. "Do you have a name?" She asked.

"Ruby." She replied. "Pyrrha gave it to me."

"Did she...do you have a name of your own?" Glynda asked.

"Nope, just Ruby." She answered. "What's your name?"

"My name is Glynda." She replied. "I'm Pyrrha's mentor and Master Witch of Patch."

"A witch...you're a witch too Pyrrha?" Ruby asked. Pyrrha nodded. "My mom doesn't like witches very much."

"Who is your mother?" Glynda asked.

"I don't know." Ruby replied. "I just remember she loves me, and she doesn't like witches."

"That doesn't really narrow it down." Glynda groaned. "Lots of people don't like witches."

"Glynda, I don't think she's...I don't think she's human." Pyrrha declared. "She's unaware of even the basics of our world. She didn't know people wear clothes, or that you have to eat and drink to stay alive."

"So what is she?" Glynda asked.

"Yeah, what am I?" Ruby added.

"I...I don't know." Pyrrha answered. "I've never encountered a summon like her."

"Hmm...Pyrrha, what sort of ritual were you performing?" Glynda pressed.

"I...um...the thing is...I'm sorry..." Pyrrha struggled.

"Oh Pyrrha..." Glynda sighed.

"I know, and I'm sorry, I truly am." Pyrrha pleaded. She bowed her head. "I just...I had to. I'll do whatever I need to in order to make up for this. I accept whatever punishment you decide to impose."

"We'll deal with that another time." Glynda declared. "Right now we need to figure out what to do about...Ruby."

"I'd like to stay, if you don't mind." Ruby requested. "I like this place. It's so warm...and being here...it just makes me happy."

"You don't mind living with witches?" Glynda asked. "Even though your mother doesn't like us?"

"You seem alright to me." Ruby shrugged.

"Won't your mother be worried about you?" Glynda inquired.

"I...I don't think so." Ruby answered. "For some reason...for some reason I think she wants me to
be here."

Glynda thought for a moment, Ruby looking at her expectantly. Pyrrha remained silent, her gaze cast down at the floor. "Well, if you're going to stay you'll need clothes that actually fit." Glynda finally noted.

"You mean I can stay?!" Ruby gasped. "Awesome!"

"Pyrrha, take Ruby to Weiss' tomorrow." Glynda ordered. "Perhaps she has some clothes that will fit our guest. If not you can go into town and buy her some."

"Yes Ruby, people have to sleep." Pyrrha confirmed. "Every night, for a few hours."

"Sounds boring." Ruby noted.

"It really is." Pyrrha chuckled. She led Ruby into the kitchen. "Now, what do you want for breakfast?"

"Breakfast?" Ruby asked.

"Food, eat, morning." Pyrrha reduced it to the simplest terms possible.

"Do people have to eat too?" Ruby asked.

"Yes." Pyrrha nodded. "I'll just make you some toast."

"If you put food in you...what happens to it?" Ruby asked. "Do you just keep getting bigger?"

"If you eat enough." Pyrrha laughed. "But not really, that's why you go to the bathroom. After your body extracts the nutrients from the food, it...you..."

"Good morning Pyrrha, Ruby." Glynda entered the room. "Pyrrha, you look perplexed."

"I was just trying to explain going to the bathroom." Pyrrha sighed. "It's hard to find the words."

"Why don't you just show me?" Ruby asked.

"Gah, no!" Pyrrha gasped. "I mean...that wouldn't be...proper."

"I'm sure we can figure all this out in time." Glynda encouraged. "Perhaps I can dig up some old children's books to help explain the basics of being human."

"That sounds much better than the alternative." Pyrrha nodded.

"So, you're going to visit Weiss, correct?" Glynda asked.

"Yes, right after breakfast." Pyrrha confirmed.

"Good, and please ask about Blake when you get there." Glynda requested. "She didn't come home last night."

"I will, anything else?" Pyrrha asked.

"If you have to purchase clothes, or feel compelled to reimburse Weiss, you will do so with your money." Glynda commanded. "Ruby is your responsibility. Caring for her will serve as absolution."
"No other punishments?" Pyrrha gasped. "But I…"

"Would you like more?" Glynda laughed. "I can add more chores if you like."

"No, it's alright, I was just expecting something more…" Pyrrha started.

"Trust me, caring for Ruby should be more than enough." Glynda cut her off. "Someone so naive of our world is going to need a lot of guidance."

The toast popped from the toaster. Pyrrha picked up a slice and handed it to Ruby. "Uh...what do I do with this?" Ruby asked.

"Oh for the love of…" Pyrrha grumbled.

Glynda smirked. "Told you."

Pyrrha knocked twice on the heavy metal door. After a few seconds it opened to reveal a thin white-haired girl about as tall as Ruby. "Hello Weiss." Pyrrha smiled.

"Pyrrha, what brings you here?" Weiss asked.

"Ruby does." Pyrrha replied. She gestured to the girl who looked ridiculous in Pyrrha's oversized clothes. "There was a little hiccup with a ritual I was performing...and now I have a new friend."

"Is she a succubus or something?" Weiss asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh, no." Pyrrha gasped. "She's a...she's...we actually have no idea what she is. She was not the intended result of the ritual, but she says she likes being here, so she's sticking around."

"Strange, summons usually hate being summoned." Weiss observed.

"Yes, it is odd." Pyrrha nodded. "Anyway, she needs clothes, and I was hoping you had something that might fit her."

"Hmm...I have some blouses that don't quite fit me." Weiss thought aloud. "Come on in, I'll get them out."

"Thank you." Pyrrha smiled. She followed Weiss into the small house. Ruby marveled at the magical objects and bits of technology that cluttered the room.

"Ooh, what's that?" Ruby asked in awe, pointing at a pulsating, glowing orb suspended in the center of the room.

"Ah, that's a power crystal." Weiss replied. She walked into a side room to search through her clothes. "I'm trying to use it to power my tech. When I swiped it I forgot to take batteries, and I was hoping to modify that crystal to power them instead. Unfortunately, its output is unstable. One moment it's not producing enough power to protect me from a pebble thrown by a child, the next it's pumping out enough to fry the shield generator. I'm trying to figure out how to smooth away the fluctuations."

"Have you asked Glynda?" Pyrrha asked. "Oh, speaking of which, is Blake here? She didn't come home last night and Glynda is worried."

"Yeah, she's here." Weiss confirmed. "She filled up on cat food and was too lazy to head home after."
"Blake!" Pyrrha called. "Time to go home!"

With an annoyed meow, a black cat with glowing golden eyes emerged from another side room. Upon spotting Ruby it froze in place, examining her. "Aw, so cute!" Ruby cheered. She rushed over and petted the cat as it purred. "Her coat is so pretty and dark..."

"It is made of darkness." Pyrrha chuckled. "Blake, meet Ruby, Ruby, meet Blake, Glynda's familiar. Alright Blake, head home. Glynda misses you." The cat meowed and walked away from Ruby, brushing past Pyrrha's legs as it headed out the still open front door. "Well, you know what a cat is."

"I guess so." Ruby shrugged.

"Do you know what a familiar is?" Pyrrha asked.

"Yes." Ruby nodded. "It's sort of like a permanent summon...a bit like me I guess."

"Except you're not bound to me." Pyrrha corrected.

"To be fair, Blake's not bound to Glynda, not anymore." Weiss declared from the other room. "Pyrrha, would you come help me carry this stuff?"

"Sure." Pyrrha replied. She hurried into the side room.

Left alone, Ruby examined her surroundings. She tried to tear her eyes away from the glowing crystal - there was so much other cool stuff - but she was mesmerized. She approached the luminous ball, reaching out toward it. "Ruby don't!" Weiss exclaimed, dropping the clothes in her hands and rushing forward.

Ruby touched the crystal, breaking the levitation field that surrounded. It fell, slamming into the hardwood floor and shattering in a burst of light and flame. When the light faded and the smoke dissipated, there was a small burned-out crater in the floor and only tiny shards of the crystal remained. "Oops." Ruby laughed uneasily. "My bad."

"Damnit!" Weiss shouted. "Do you have any idea how expensive that was?!"

"I'm really sorry." Ruby apologized.

"Weiss, she doesn't know better." Pyrrha declared. "I'll...I'll pay for the damage, and a replacement."

"I don't want your money, I can afford it." Weiss hissed through gritted teeth. "Just...try on the clothes while I clean this up. And don't touch anything."
Ruby tried on some of Weiss' old clothes with the help of Pyrrha. Ruby's nonchalance about nudity disturbed Pyrrha, but she managed to power through. Meanwhile, Weiss swept up the crystal shards and cleaned the floor. Her privileged upbringing had not prepared her for such domestic chores, but after fleeing her life of luxury she had learned quickly. Still, she was much more at home wielding a sword than a broom. Eventually Ruby and Pyrrha settled on a few outfits that fit Ruby well enough, but there was one issue. Ruby would need underwear that fit, so a shopping trip was in order.

"Next stop, the shops." Pyrrha announced as she and Ruby headed for the exit. "Would you like to join us Weiss?"

"No, that's alright." Weiss replied. "I have plans tonight, and I must prepare."

"Oh?" Pyrrha asked. "What kind of plans?"

"I'm going on a date." Weiss answered.

"Congratulations, anyone I know?" Pyrrha inquired.

"I doubt it." Weiss declared. "She's new in town. I met her in the tavern the other day."

"Does this she have a name?" Pyrrha pressed. "What's she like?"

"Cindy." Weiss replied. "She's the...dark and sultry type I guess. And she has enchanting golden eyes."

"Well, good luck." Pyrrha smiled.

"Yeah...and good luck yourself." Weiss stared daggers at Ruby. "You'll need it."

Velvet sat behind the counter of her store, warmed by a raging hearth in the back. She was kept company by her pet rabbit Womp, who was nestled in her basket beside the ivory cloak Velvet was sewing. Weiss - one of her highest paying and most frequent customers - had visited the prior day with yet another commission, a thick travel cloak for her ingredient gathering and huntress work. The colder seasons were settling in, leaves fading from green to amber, winds beginning to bite at exposed ankles and ears. In time it would be snowing. Weiss despised the cold, saying it reminded her of home. Velvet took pride in her work, and Weiss knew this. A simple cloak became a work of art - hooded, the same white-grey fur that lined it ringing its neckline, to be held in place by a silver broach cast in Port's forge. Velvet lovingly embroidered Weiss' name in flowing cursive, silver lined with black, along with her maker's mark, a patchwork heart.

Behind Velvet, the door opened, jingling the signal bell. "I'll be with you in a minute." Velvet called. She had only a few stitches to go, but was surprised when her formerly dozing rabbit suddenly jumped from her basket, running along the table beneath the window, heading for the front counter. Velvet found this strange. Womp was normally meek and lazy, preferring to stick to her basket until they returned to her room upstairs.

"Oh, hey cutie!" Ruby cheered as the rabbit approached. She began stroking the rabbit's back.
"Aw, you're adorable!"

"Her name is Womp." Pyrrha noted.

"Womp?" Ruby asked. "That's a funny name."

Velvet chuckled as she finished her sewing, tying off and trimming the last thread. "I named her that because she stamps her feet when she wants to be petted." She explained.

"Wouldn't that make her Stamper?" Ruby asked.

Velvet stood, picking up the cloak and throwing it over her shoulders. "It's the noise really." Velvet declared. "How does it look?"

"It's wonderful." Pyrrha praised.

"Whoa, that looks beautiful!" Ruby exclaimed. "What is it?"

"That is a cloak Ruby." Pyrrha replied. "Humans wear them to keep warm in colder months."

"Ooh, will I need one?" Ruby asked.

"I assume so." Pyrrha answered. "Ruby, meet Velvet, Velvet, Ruby."

"Hello Ruby." Velvet greeted. "Did you come from a hotter climate?"

"I don't know, I'm just here now." Ruby shrugged.

"I had a little summoning accident of my own." Pyrrha admitted. "Ruby was the result. We don't really know much about her, but she asked to stay."

"I'm an accident!" Ruby cheered.

Velvet burst into laughter and Pyrrha rolled her eyes. "Yes, well my little accident needs some clothes." Pyrrha grinned. "Namely underwear. Weiss was able to spare a few outfits, but Weiss is...well Ruby is..."

"A little bustier?" Velvet suggested.

"Yes, bustier." Pyrrha nodded.

"Well, come on over and I'll measure you." Velvet offered.

"Sure!" Ruby agreed. She gave Womp another stroke along her ears before following Velvet through a curtain in the back of the shop.

Hearing a light whomping sound, Pyrrha looked back to see Womp teetering on the edge of the counter, nose twitching toward the back room curtain, foot tapping on the wood. Certain the rabbit would jump, Pyrrha quickly bundled it into her arms, carrying her to her basket and setting her back inside. Though restless, the rabbit calmed once Pyrrha began imitating Ruby's ministrations. After some murmuring, Velvet returned through the curtain.

"Such a cutie pie." Velvet smiled.

"She is quite endearing, much like Womp, only with less fur." Pyrrha joked. "How goes your...fashion project?"
Velvet tensed briefly before biting her lip. "Nothing concrete." She replied. "I am looking into a new sewing technique though. It might be nothing, but hey, gotta’ try new things."

"So long as you're careful." Pyrrha warned.

"You know I try Pyrrha, but thank you." Velvet nodded. "So...Ruby? She's surprisingly voluptuous for her age...is age the correct word?"

"I'm not quite sure myself." Pyrrha admitted. "She speaks fluently, can carry intelligent conversation, and has no issue moving around...but she lacks basic human knowledge. Clothes, for example, were entirely foreign to her. Sustenance, bodily functions...but she has uh...assets of someone maybe two or three years my junior."

"Pyrrha, Velvet, how do I put this on?" Ruby asked. The other two turned to her. Pyrrha gasped, covering her eyes, and Velvet chuckled at the sight of Ruby, clad in nothing but black boyshorts, holding up a bra with a puzzled look on her face.

"Come on Pyrrha, she's your accident." Velvet teased.

Pyrrha blocked Ruby from sight with her hand and glared at Velvet. "At least my accident might be productive!" She countered.

Velvet took on an affronted look. "Leave Womp out of this!"

By the time Ruby and Pyrrha returned home it was evening. Ruby was surprised to see someone new, a black haired woman, lounging on the couch in the living room. Ruby was sure she had never seen her, but there was something familiar about her. The way her hair seemed to absorb all light struck Ruby as odd, and all the shadows in the room seemed deeper and more clearly defined. "Blake, tone down the shadow please." Glynda requested, walking into the room.

"Fine." The woman huffed. The shadows returned to normal and her hair became a more natural, if still very dark, black.

"You're Blake?!" Ruby gasped.

"Oh, you've met." Glynda smiled.

"We have." Blake confirmed. "Ruby gives the best scratches."

"Now you're just trying to make me jealous." Glynda accused.

"I sure am." Blake chuckled.

"So Glynda, do we have any jobs tonight?" Pyrrha asked.

"None." Glynda replied. "So I thought we could work on finding out what Ruby is. Getting any vibes Blake?"

"She's certainly not human." Blake declared. "She has a very calming aura, similar to an aspect of shadow, but different. No, she's not of the shadows either."

"Very well, Ruby, if you don't mind, I'd like to run some tests." Glynda noted.

"What kind of tests?" Ruby asked.

"None." Glynda replied. "So I thought we could work on finding out what Ruby is. Getting any vibes Blake?"

"She's certainly not human." Blake declared. "She has a very calming aura, similar to an aspect of shadow, but different. No, she's not of the shadows either."

"Very well, Ruby, if you don't mind, I'd like to run some tests." Glynda noted.

"What kind of tests?" Ruby asked.
"To put it bluntly, I was hoping to blast you with a few elements to see what happens." Glynda admitted. "It could hurt, but everything should be rather controlled."

"Glynda, maybe we shouldn't..." Pyrrha started.

"I'll give it a try." Ruby said. "I want to find out what I am just as much as you all do."

"Splendid." Glynda cheered. "Now, to the test chamber!"

"She means the basement." Blake added.

"Can you let me play mad scientist just once?" Glynda complained.

"Funny, you're usually the one telling us to take things seriously." Blake observed. "Not so fun when the shoe's on the other foot."

"Noted." Glynda grumbled. "Let's just get started."

Using spells, all carefully calibrated to cause minimal harm, Glynda tested various elements on Ruby. First was fire. A red-hot blast to Ruby's hand did not even leave a mark. Next was ice. Ruby's arm was encased in ice, only for that ice to fall away as anything near her skin immediately melted. A blast of wind had no effect, the air seeming to curve around her without impacting. Electricity also failed to produce a result. Ruby said it tickled. Blasts of both darkness and light did nothing. It was as if Ruby was immune to everything. She was not immune to pain, as when Glynda twisted her arm she yelped and complained.

"Well, the results are in." Glynda declared.

"What am I?" Ruby asked.

"I have no idea." Glynda sighed. "The tests told me nothing. That in itself is probably important, but I cannot wrap my head around it."

"Oh...that's disappointing." Ruby sulked.

"Ruby, do you remember anyone from before you were summoned?" Pyrrha asked. "You mentioned a mother, did you have any friends?"

"Hmm..." Ruby scratched her head as she thought. "Well, there is Yang."

"Yang?" Glynda asked.

"Yeah, Yang, an aspect of fire." Ruby nodded. "She was really warm, so I used to hang around with her. It's all kind of fuzzy though."

"Maybe she'll know what you are." Pyrrha suggested. "Can you summon her?"

"Uh, sure, I guess." Ruby shrugged.

"It's worth a try." Glynda encouraged.

Ruby began speaking in a language none of those present had ever heard, in a tone of voice that did not match her appearance. Her eyes widened and her hands waved about, at once wild and precise. Then she pointed to an empty corner of the room and flames erupted from the concrete floor. The flames resolved into the figure of a beautiful woman with glowing red eyes and long hair made of
fire. The figured looked around, then scowled.

"How dare you summon me?!" The aspect of flame demanded. "Do you know who I am? Yang! Daughter of the Dragon God of Fire! I will…"

"Yang, calm down." Ruby beseeched. "We just wanted to ask you a few questions."

"Wha…" Yang started, her flames subsiding a bit. "Hey…it's you…that sprite…uh…hmm…never did give you a name."

"They call me Ruby, so I guess that's as good as anything." Ruby shrugged. "We're trying to figure out what I am. So I was a sprite?"

"Yeah, a little red glow." Yang confirmed. "Who are these people?"

"Oh, that's Glynda, Blake, and this is my mistress, Pyrrha." Ruby answered.

"Mistress…she enslaved you?!" Yang screamed. The flames surrounding her grew to such intensity that only her glowing eyes were visible amongst the conflagration. "I'll incinerate you!"

"No, no, stop!" Ruby pleaded. "It's not like that at all. Pyrrha had a little magical accident and I popped out. And she didn't enslave me, I wanted to stay."

"Oh…well then." Yang sighed, her flames returning to normal again. "It's cool that you can talk now. Maybe now our conversations won't be so one-sided."

"Do you have any idea what I am?" Ruby asked.

"Nope." Yang shook her head. "You just kind of floated around me. You weren't much for conversation, but you were a great listener, and I always felt warm when you were around."

"You're made of fire." Blake noted. "How did she make you feel warm?"

"I dunno'." Yang shrugged. "But she did. You weren't always around, but I always felt better when you were. You even followed me to the mortal world when I went to kill monsters once."

"Someone's summoned you before?" Glynda asked.

"No, I went on my own." Yang replied. "It's a drain, leaves me feeling tired, but I made the jump and burned a few beasties. I do it every once in a while. It's a great way to work out stress."

"A spirit that can self-summon, remarkable." Pyrrha gasped.

"Hey…uh…if you don't mind, could I hang around too?" Yang asked. "I'd love to actually talk to Ruby, and since I didn't have to summon myself, I can take on some monsters at full strength."

"If you wish." Glynda agreed. "Do try not to set anything on fire. Hmm…perhaps you could spend some time with Port at the forge. Until then, the hearth upstairs is a good place for you."

"Sweet, never fueled a forge or a hearth actually." Yang nodded. "People don't summon me often."

With a whoosh and a flash of light, Yang shot up the stairs and out of the basement.

"It was good to see her again...but…" Ruby trailed off.

"But what?" Pyrrha asked.
"I still wish I knew what I was." Ruby replied.

"Since magic didn't work, I suppose we could turn to science." Glynda suggested. "I'll take a blood sample and have it tested."

"Okay, what do I have to do?" Ruby asked.

"Just hold out your arm." Glynda answered. She searched around some of her equipment, finally coming up with a needle attached to a vial. Blake helpfully tied some rubber tubing around Ruby's arm. Glynda found a suitable blood vessel. "This might pinch." She warned. Glynda jabbed the needle into Ruby's arm. Ruby squirmed a bit but no blood was produced. She tried again, nothing. After several more tries it was clear that she was not going to get her sample. "Well then, I guess I'm not getting anything out of you." She sighed. "Pyrrha, Blake, please help me clean up.

Glynda, Pyrrha and Blake went to work cleaning up the magical implements they had used to test Ruby. Disappointed, Ruby sat in a chair beside a table with more equipment. She spotted something she thought might help, and she went for it. "Uh, how much blood do you need?" Ruby asked.

"Why?" Glynda asked. She turned to find Ruby sitting there, blood gushing from her arm and into a bottle she had taken from the table. A bloody knife sat beside her. "Gods!"

"Wha...holy!" Pyrrha gasped as she too turned to see.

"Wow, that's pretty metal." Blake joked.

The bottle filled up and Ruby placed it on the table, picking up another. During the switch, her blood stopped mid-air, swirling about beside her arm. As soon as the second bottle was in place, it resumed its flow. "I think that's…" Pyrrha started.

"No, let her keep going." Glynda cut her off. "You don't feel faint or anything, do you?"

"I'm fine." Ruby shrugged as the second bottle neared full. She put it aside and started filling a third. "How much do you want?"

"Just fill all the bottles on the rack." Glynda replied.

"Glynda, this is dangerous." Pyrrha protested. "What if she dies?"

"She would have bled to death already if it was possible." Glynda noted, gesturing toward the two full bottles. "We've already determined that she's not human. The more blood we can run tests on, the better."

"Ugh...but the smell." Pyrrha complained.

"Why don't you go upstairs to keep Yang company?" Glynda suggested. "We'll be up when we're done."

"Ruby, if you feel sick or weak stop right away, okay?" Pyrrha requested.

"Okay." Ruby smiled and nodded. Pyrrha took one last look, shaking her head before heading up the stairs. What manner of creature had she summoned?

Pyrrha stomped up the stairs and nearly slammed the door behind her. She took a deep breath of warm, fresh air. "Everything okay down there?" Yang asked. She sat in the hearth, her upper body
fully formed, the lower a more abstract swirl of flame.

"Ruby is donating a rather generous amount of blood." Pyrrha replied. "The smell was overpowering."

"Aw, a bit squeamish are we?" Yang teased.

"...are you...comfortable?" Pyrrha asked.

"Mostly." Yang answered. "Could use some more wood though." Pyrrha picked up several logs from the stack beside the hearth, and the flames parted to allow her to arrange them in a row. As she withdrew her hands the flames returned, this time twisting into a visage of Yang's upper body with arms folded and rested on the logs as if they were but pillows from a bed. "Cheers, almost feels like home."

"Where is home exactly?" Pyrrha inquired.

"The planes of flame, duh." Yang replied.

"And Ruby just happened upon you?" Pyrrha pressed.

"I guess." Yang shrugged. "Ruby just kinda' appeared one day. She didn't talk, just kept me company. It can get lonely sometimes. Being the daughter of a god means no one wants to mess with you, or they just wanna' suck up for favor, or worse, progeny."

"People...spirits...wanted you for children?" Pyrrha struggled.

"Well yeah, who doesn't wanna' mate with a fire goddess?" Yang chuckled.

"But how would that work exactly?" Pyrrha asked. "I thought aspects were generated from their elemental source."

"Yeah, and that can happen, but it's considered wasteful." Yang explained. "Better to find a mate and share essence. One plus one equals two, ya'know?"

"Ah, so as to prevent stagnation?" Pyrrha suggested.

"Exactly." Yang confirmed. "Take me for example. My mother was an aspect of dark...sorta'."

"Unsure?" Pyrrha asked.

"Luck is more a concept than an elemental aspect." Yang shrugged. "But dark seems to resonate with mum more than anything, 'specially bad luck, poor Uncle Qrow."

"But how does...uh...mating work for you?" Pyrrha inquired.

Yang grinned, her eyes flaring. "Curious, aren't we?" She smirked.

"I...uh...I'm attempting to learn." Pyrrha explained. "Forgive me if it is too much to ask."

"I'm just teasing you." Yang laughed. "You humans can be so prudish. Mating isn't really a physical thing, because we aren't always physical beings. Some of us just prefer it, and physical intimacy is still pretty fun."

"So I've heard." Pyrrha sighed.
"There are two ways to mate." Yang continued. "The first is faster, and usually done between
temporary mates. We combine our essences, our souls essentially, and form them into a little sprite.
It's taxing, because we have to separate from our combined essence, so we end up weakened and
vulnerable. We give up a part of ourselves to create new life."

"That's beautiful." Pyrrha declared.

"Yeah...the other way is slower, much slower, depending on the relationship." Yang went on.
"Naturally our essences emanate, 'specially the powerful ones. Two emanating entities with a
strong bond will eventually mate passively, and should the pair desire it, one or both parents will
nurture the sprite 'til maturity, kinda' like humans do, but with less screaming and more feeding off
the parent's essence."

"And when they reach maturity?" Pyrrha asked.

"It varies." Yang replied. "Sometimes sprites just come into their own, sometimes there's a rite of
passage or a ritual. I think maybe that's what happened to Ruby. She's on her rite, she's being
tested. On what? How? No idea. Maybe that's why she came to you, maybe she's meant to serve
you, or learn from you."

"I...I don't know what I can teach her to be honest." Pyrrha noted. "I'm still training myself. Glynda
would be more suited to education."

"Maybe that's part of it." Yang suggested. "You two can grow alongside each other, learn as you
go. Whenever something comes up, you both tackle it together, like partners."

"Partners...I think Ruby might like that." Pyrrha smiled.

"There ya' go, and I'll help out whenever I can." Yang promised. "It's been boring lately, and I've
missed Ruby. Definitely gonna' stay a while."

"I am sorry that we gave you the wrong first impression." Pyrrha apologized. "I have not bound
Ruby. If she desired, she could leave, go wherever she pleased. But she seems content to stay with
me for the time being."

"No biggie." Yang shrugged. "As far as witches go you two seem alright. Met a few nasty ones in
my time. Glad I didn't have to char your bones or anything."

Pyrrha laughed uneasily. "Me too."
The following day, Glynda took some of Ruby's blood samples off to be tested. Pyrrha took Ruby and Yang into town, planning to drop Yang off at Port's forge. The incredible heat of the forge would feel like home to Yang, and she could converse with the blacksmith. Port was a retired Huntsman. The pudgy, mustachioed man loved to regale visitors with tales of his battles against all manner of supernatural creatures. Yang had shown a similar propensity for telling tall tales, conversing with Pyrrha and Ruby long into the night, describing her own fights, both in and out of the mortal realm.

For the trip into town, Pyrrha insisted Yang take on human form so as not to alarm the locals. Even fully tame magical beasts were eyed with concern and sometimes fear, and Yang was anything but. Pyrrha also had to insist that Yang’s visage include clothing, and the fire spirit reluctantly obliged, forming a rather skimpy outfit from her flames. Ruby got to take one of her new outfits for a test run and Pyrrha dressed casually. Everyone knew she was a witch, but they seemed less jumpy around her when she dressed like everyone else. Apparently she had not been a witch so long that they had forgotten the bright and friendly - if awkward - little girl who had once harbored dreams of being a huntress.

The trio arrived at Port's shop. As usual, the man himself was out front, working at the forge he had placed in full view of passersby. He looked up and noticed Pyrrha. "I'll be with you in just a minute." He declared. "I must ask a favor of you. How goes your training?"

"It's going well, thank you." Pyrrha replied. "There have been a few hiccups, but no major issues."

"Are you sure you do not wish for your spear to be repaired?" Port asked. "It is still in my possession, and though Weiss may be a fine huntress, the more the merrier!"

"No thanks." Pyrrha sighed. Port seemed to ask her every time they met. "I'd rather not dig up the past."

"I thought that's what you were literally doing when-" Ruby started.

"What was that favor?" Pyrrha cut in before Ruby could spill the beans.

"I have a piece for Velvet." Port answered. "Could you bring it to her?"

"Of course." Pyrrha agreed.

"I'm beat." Yang complained. "Going solid is so exhausting."

"Just wait for Port to finish with-" Pyrrha suggested.

"I'll just grab some fire." Yang announced. She walked up beside Port - who did not even look up from his work - and thrust her arm into the fire. She glowed, becoming translucent, and flames swirled around her limb. "Ah, much better."

"Demon!" Port shouted. He tossed the half-finished blade he had been working on aside and leapt up with the agility of a man half his size and age. He reached up, grabbed the an axe from a display on the wall, and swung it through Yang. The blade passes through her to no effect.
"Uh, I'm made of literal fire." Yang noted. "Your weapons can't hurt me."

"Fire eh?" Port said. "I have just the thing!" He reached into a nearby drawer and pulled out a small, pink toy gun. He aimed it at Yang. "Always be prepared!" He pulled the trigger, and a tiny stream of water squirted out, hitting Yang dead center in the chest.

There was a puff of steam and the flames surrounding Yang briefly dimmed before suddenly growing in intensity. "Ah, bitch!" Yang yelled. "That hurt!"

"Ha ha, take that monster!" Port boomed.

"I'll incinerate you!" Yang screamed.

"Yang, calm down!" Ruby pleaded.

"Mr. Port, please." Pyrrha beseeched. "She's not a demon, just one of my summons."

"Oh...well then...my apologies." Port held up his hands. The fire surrounding Yang died down, then faded as she returned fully to human form. "Sometimes I just shift into huntsman mode."

"No harm, no foul." Yang grumbled. "And to think I was going to power your forge for you."

"You were?" Port asked. "Why didn't you say something sooner?"

"I was going to ask you when you finished." Pyrrha replied.

"You're welcome to hop in if you like." Port offered. "I'm very sorry for attacking you."

"Hmm, maybe some other time." Yang declined. "Right now I might be tempted to singe your mustache."

"Yes, we'll just give Yang a little time to calm down." Pyrrha declared. "I'll take that piece to Velvet if you like."

"Of course, thank you." Port nodded. He grabbed a silver broach marked "W. S." from a nearby table and handed it to Pyrrha.

"Ah, this must be for Weiss' cloak." Pyrrha observed.

"It is indeed." Port confirmed.

"Maybe we could bring the cloak to Weiss...and apologize for yesterday." Pyrrha suggested.

"Apologize for what?" Yang asked.

"I blew up her crystal." Ruby sighed.

"Why did you do that?" Yang asked.

"I didn't do it on purpose." Ruby replied. "But she was really mad."

Pyrrha flashed a reassuring smile. "I'm sure she'll forgive you."

With the broach from Port, Velvet quickly completed Weiss' cloak. She was happy to let Pyrrha and her supernatural friends deliver it. Weiss paid upfront so there was no need waste her time by calling her in to collect it herself. Pyrrha knocked twice on Weiss' metal door. After a few
moments Weiss opened it. "Oh, hello Pyrrha…" Weiss greeted. She noticed Ruby and stared daggers at her. "Hello...you..."

"I'm really sorry." Ruby apologized once again.

"Who is this?" Weiss asked, gesturing to Yang.


"We came to deliver your cloak." Pyrrha noted.

"Thank you." Weiss said. Pyrrha handed it over. "If that's all-"

"What did you need the crystal for?" Yang asked.

"I was hoping to use it to power some tech." Weiss replied. "It was proving too variable however."

"Maybe I could power up a crystal for you." Yang suggested.

"Hmm...I have a few inert crystals lying around." Weiss declared. "What kind of energy would it be?"

"Heat, obviously." Yang answered.

"Not ideal, but it could work." Weiss thought aloud. "Okay, let's give it a shot. Come in." She paused, then pointed to Ruby. "You, wait." Weiss rushed into a side room, returning with a box, some papers, and a roll of painting tape in her hand. She put the box and papers on a table, then made a ring around the table with the tape. "Ruby is not to leave that circle."

"I think the box of crayons might be a bit patronizing." Pyrrha noted.

Ruby sat at the table and opened the box. "What do I do with these?"

"You can draw, on the paper." Weiss replied. "Don't make a mess."

"Cool!" Ruby cheered. She pulled a crayon from the box and went to work.

"Alright then, let's get down to business." Weiss urged. "Follow me." She led Pyrrha and Yang into a side room, from the look of it, one used for storage. She approached a stack of drawers, slid one out, and grabbed a small transparent crystal. "Can you power this up?"

"Sure." Yang nodded. "How much?"

"That's the tricky part." Weiss answered. "It has to be fairly exact." After digging through another drawer, she found some scientific apparatus and attached it to the crystal. "Just power it up slowly and I'll tell you when to stop."

"Child's play." Yang boasted. She laid a hand on the crystal. It began to glow, slowly brightening as the attached meter began beeping, faster and faster.

"Okay, stop." Weiss commanded as the beeps merged into a continuous tone. "Perfect." She reached out toward the crystal.

"Stop!" Yang warned. "It's hot. Human skin doesn't hold up well to that kind of heat."

"Oh, thank you for the warning." Weiss backed off. She said a spell and the crystal levitated,
settling onto a stand against the wall. "Will it cool? It will be difficult to work on if I can't touch it."

"Give it a day or two." Yang suggested. "It'll still be warm, but it should be safe to touch."

"You seem to know a bit about human physiology." Pyrrha observed.

"I learned from experience." Yang explained. "Not every human I've met has been so agreeable."

"I don't even want to know." Pyrrha shivered. Weiss began packing away her equipment. "How was your date?"

"Wonderful." Weiss replied. "I'm meeting her again on Friday night."

"Congrats." Pyrrha smiled.

"Well, we're done here." Weiss declared. "I hope Ruby hasn't destroyed my front room."

The trio exited the side room to find Ruby still sitting at the table, happily coloring away. Several crayons were clustered around the paper. "Alright Ruby, we're ready to go." Pyrrha said.

"I'm just...about...done!" Ruby picked up the paper and looked it over for a moment before handing it to Pyrrha. "What do you think?"

Pyrrha examined the artwork, holding it so Weiss and Yang could see as well. "Ruby...what is this?" She asked. The picture depicted several clearly dead monsters, some burned, some dismembered, with some still burning.

"That's Yang's Rite of Passage." Ruby replied. "I followed her to the mortal realm for it. She killed some monsters."

"This is incredibly detailed...a masterpiece." Weiss gasped. "How did you do this with crayons?" Ruby shrugged.

"Are those...skeletons?" Pyrrha asked. "Grimm don't have skeletons. They look...human." One was very charred, another impaled on the burned remains of a tree, and a third appeared to have been ripped apart.

"Yeah, some evil witches were controlling the monsters, sending them to attack a nearby village." Ruby explained. "Yang's mission was to eliminate the threat, so she killed them too."

"The one I burned alive screamed a lot." Yang reminisced. "The others tried to run but I got them too. They died a lot quicker. This drawing is great by the way. It's just how I remember it."

"This is incredible artwork." Weiss agreed. "I think I'll frame it and hang it up."

Pyrrha looked pale and faint. "I need to lay down."

Yang burned away in the hearth while Ruby and Pyrrha sat on a couch nearby, chatting with her. Pyrrha had only just finished practicing some spells, part of her ongoing training. Pyrrha was exhausted, but even after a long day, Ruby still seemed to be bursting with energy. Yang had been worn out after their trip into town, but recharged by burning a few logs in the hearth. "So I'm trying to relax, and this ice demon shows up." Yang continued her story. "He tries to chat me up, gives me so lame line about opposites attracting. I told him to leave me alone, but the bastard was persistent."
"What did you do?" Ruby asked.

"Let's just say he's a steam demon now." Yang smirked.

"That must have been painful." Pyrrha noted.

"You'd better believe it was painful." Yang confirmed. "The jerk wouldn't stop screaming."

"Wouldn't that anger the ice gods?" Pyrrha asked.

"Eh, not really." Yang shrugged. "Once we aspects come of age, our parents usually don't factor into our lives much. Sure, if I asked my father for help he'd help, but if I did something stupid - like hit on a goddess who was clearly not interested - I wouldn't expect him to bail me out or go on the warpath or anything." She paused. "He would probably get annoyed if I was summoned and bound or something like that. Hmm...I should probably let him know I'm here because I want to be, you know, before he starts incinerating."

"Yes, that's probably a good idea." Pyrrha agreed.

Yang reached out her spectral hand, palm up. A flame appeared above it, growing until it was the size of a fist. She snapped her fingers and the flame disappeared. "There, message sent." Yang announced.

"I wonder if I could send a message like that to my mom…" Ruby thought aloud. "Maybe with blood…"

"Let's keep your blood on the inside for now." Pyrrha advised. "At least until we know a little more about you."

The sound of the door opening cut the conversation short. "We're back." Glynda called.

"We're in here!" Pyrrha responded.

Glynda strolled into the room, Blake on her shoulders in cat form. She picked up Blake, and tossed her toward a nearby chair. Blake transformed midair, landing in human form on the seat. "Thanks for carrying me." Blake waved.

"Such a lazy kitty." Ruby giggled.

"Well, I got Ruby's blood tested." Glynda declared.

"Did you learn anything?" Pyrrha asked.

"The tests showed it to be normal human blood." Glynda replied. "Type A positive. Ruby seems to be a perfectly healthy human girl."

"A positive...that's my blood type." Pyrrha noted.

"That makes sense." Glynda declared. "We know Ruby is most certainly not human, and you're the one who summoned her. Some connection was to be expected." She reached into her pocket and produced a vial of Ruby's blood. "When you...donated...your blood, you seemed to have some control over it. I'm wondering how much. Do you think you could levitate the vial?"

"I can try." Ruby shrugged. Glynda held the vial out in her open palm. Ruby reached out toward her, concentrating, focusing on the blood. Glynda suddenly pulled her hand away, but the vial did not fall. Well, the vial did, but the blood inside kept it floating in the air. "Cool!"
"Can you use it to force the stopper out of the vial?" Glynda asked. Ruby closed her eyes, clenched her outstretched hand into a fist, then rapidly opened it. The stopper popped out of the vial. It fell away and Glynda caught it, leaving an oblong glob of blood floating in the air. "Good, play a little." Ruby stretched out a single finger, then made a circular motion. The blood formed a circle in the air. She moved her finger in a zig-zag, and the blood followed the pattern. "Very good. Now, put it back in the vial." Glynda held out the vial, its open top up. Ruby pointed to it and the blood streamed back into place. Glynda put the stopper back on and put the vial away. "Interesting...interesting..."

"That was fun!" Ruby cheered.

"That was disturbing." Pyrrha shivered.

"Maybe Ruby can make clothes from her blood, the way I use shadow and Yang uses flame." Blake suggested.

"Let's not try." Pyrrha pleaded.

"Perhaps some other time." Glynda said. "This has been quite enlightening. I must do some research."

"Do you have any idea what I am?" Ruby asked.

"Not yet." Glynda replied. "But we're closer to figuring it out than we were."

The next day, Glynda was busy with her responsibilities at Master Witch of Patch, and so out of the house. Taking care of Ruby had caused Pyrrha to fall behind in her training regimen, so she dedicated the day to catching up. This time without incident, Yang joined Port at the forge, swapping monster fighting stories with the boastful Huntsman. That left Blake to look after Ruby. Blake decided to teach Ruby how to read and write. It was a surprisingly easy task, as Ruby absorbed the lessons like a sponge. After going through the alphabet, Blake taught Ruby to write her own name and the names of her friends, then moved on to more complex matters. Ruby seemed to have an innate understanding of syntax, and though her spelling was all over the place, overall she was quite a writer.

In the evening, Glynda remained out, tending to the elderly man she was so often called upon to assist. Yang returned home and helped Pyrrha cook dinner, heating the stove to the perfect temperature for her. Blake would have preferred seafood, but there was none in the house, so Pyrrha made fried chicken tenders. Once it was cooked, Yang abstained, but Blake and Ruby joined Pyrrha in eating the meal.

"Hold on a second...do you even have to eat?" Pyrrha asked of Ruby mid-meal.

"Uh...I dunno'." Ruby shrugged.

"Since she's not human, not of this realm, I doubt it." Blake declared. "I don't have to eat. I just do so because it's enjoyable."

"Now that you mention it, Ruby's been eating the whole time she's been here, but she's never had to use the bathroom." Pyrrha observed.

"In all my years in the mortal world, I've never had to either." Blake noted. "Our bodies don't work that way. We convert anything we consume into pure energy, so there's no waste. If I didn't eat, I could draw on the shadows for energy. Drawing from my elemental source is the most efficient
way to absorb energy."

"I'm the same way." Yang added. "If I really need energy I can just jam a part of my body into a fire. Hell, I could just draw heat from all around me if I really had to."

"I wonder what Ruby's elemental source is..." Pyrrha thought aloud.

"No idea." Ruby shrugged. "But this chicken is delicious!"

Pyrrha turned back to Blake and Yang. "You don't have to eat or use the bathroom, but your bodies have all the...parts...in human form." Pyrrha struggled. "Ruby does too. Why?"

"Our human forms are meant to create the illusion that we're just normal mortals." Blake explained. "Originally, the ability to take human form was a way for the gods to walk among man, and since all aspects are related to the gods in some form, we retain this ability."

"But I can't change into anything else." Ruby challenged. "I can't become an animal like Blake, or fire like Yang, or anything like that."

"Maybe it has to do with how you were summoned." Yang theorized. "Or maybe it's a condition of your Rite of Passage."

"It would probably help if we knew what you are." Pyrrha noted.

"Yeah, it'd be nice to figure out what I am." Ruby sighed. Her mood quickly brightened. "It's not that big a deal though. Hanging out here with you guys is really fun!"
After dinner Ruby took up the colored pencils provided by Pyrrha and began drawing. This time she did not draw some harrowing scene out of one of Yang's trips to the mortal realm, she drew portraits of the people she had met. Pyrrha, Glynda, Blake (both human and cat form), Velvet and Womp, Yang, Weiss and even Port made the list. The portraits were incredibly detailed and accurate, almost photo-realistic. Whatever Ruby was, she had a talent for art. Since Weiss had enjoyed Ruby's earlier artwork, Ruby decided to give Weiss her portrait. It was part gift, part apology for the crystal fiasco.

Ruby was eager to go immediately, but it was late. Pyrrha insisted they retire for the night and bring Weiss her present the following day. As they had since Ruby's summoning, Pyrrha took her spot at the edge of her bed with Ruby positioned on the opposite side. The bed was fairly large, and it was a comfortable enough arrangement. Pyrrha did notice the Ruby inched closer every night. Given Ruby's preoccupation with warmth, Pyrrha assumed that to be the reason. Whatever the reason, the added warmth was welcome as the winter approached and the nights grew colder.

Weiss stood before a mirror, adjusting her makeup. It was the third time she had applied it, but she could just not quite get it right. There was a knock at the door and she flinched, only just avoiding a slip that would have forced her to start over once again. She put the brush down, took a deep breath, and walked over the answer the door, not knowing who it would be. She opened it to find Pyrrha, trailed by Ruby and Yang. Ruby was carrying something under her arm.

"Hello Weiss." Pyrrha smiled.

"Hello Pyrrha, what brings you here?" Weiss asked.

"Ruby has something to give you, and Yang wanted to make sure everything was going alright with the crystal." Pyrrha replied.

"Come in." Weiss offered, taking a step back and waving. "Please excuse the mess." Various garments were scattered about, with one white dress on a stand. "I just got finished picking out a dress for my date, and I was adjusting my makeup."

"Oh, is your date soon?" Pyrrha asked. "We could come back later."

"No, no, it's not for a few hours." Weiss shook her head. "I guess I'm just getting a little obsessive. I don't want to mess this up, you know? I've never met anyone like Cindy, she's just so...so...I really want this to work out. Tonight could be the night."

"I'm sure everything will be fine." Pyrrha encouraged.

"A sexy thing like you has nothing to worry about." Yang added with a wink.

"Yes, well, I still want to be sure." Weiss declared. "So, Ruby, what do you have for me?"

Ruby held out a paper towards Weiss, keeping it face down. "You liked the scene I drew, and I drew everyone, so I thought I'd give you the portrait I made of you." Ruby explained. "I hope you like it."
Weiss flipped the paper over and examined the artwork. "This is incredible." She gasped. "I...I have to get this framed. Thank you!"

"Awesome!" Ruby cheered. "So, do you forgive me for the crystal thing? I'm still really sorry about that."

Weiss paused, grinning. "I suppose I do." She confirmed. "And I'm sorry for how I reacted."

"Touching." Yang rolled her eyes. "So, about that crystal..."

"It looks to be just what I needed." Weiss noted. "The output is strong and steady, though I'll have to work on containing it. The heat builds up rapidly when it's in an enclosed space, and if I wore it under my cloak as intended, it would overheat and probably start a fire."

"Maybe Glynda can figure something out." Pyrrha suggested.

A frantic knock at the door interrupted their conversation. Weiss sighed and headed over to open it. A scared-looking man stood there. "Madam Huntress, there's a Beowolf near town!" The man exclaimed. "It's dangerously."

"Slow down." Weiss commanded. "What were you doing and where did you see it?"

"I was coming back from a trip to the mainland, following the main road, and there was a Beowolf in a field." The man explained. "It couldn't have been more than a quarter mile from the town!"

"One Beowolf isn't much of a threat, but where there's one there are usually more." Weiss thought aloud. "I should check it out."

"Yang and I can handle it." Pyrrha offered.

"No, it's my job." Weiss countered.

"But your date-" Pyrrha started.

"I must go." Weiss cut her off. "If there's a pack of Beowolves that near the town, you'll need my blade." She turned to the man, still standing at the door. "Thank you for reporting this, I'll head right out."

"Thank you ma'am." The man bowed before rushing off to spread the warning.

"This will be good." Weiss declared. "Something to take my mind off things, keep me from driving myself crazy."

"Should I go with you?" Ruby asked.

Pyrrha paused. "No, it's too dangerous." She decided. "Stay here."

"Yes, it's safer here." Weiss agreed. She picked up the belt from which her sword hung, fastening it around her waist. "Don't leave the room." She tossed her cloak over her shoulders and fastened it in place.

With that Weiss rushed out, hastily followed by Pyrrha and Yang. Ruby stood there by the door for a few seconds after it closed. She was disappointed she had not been included, but understood Pyrrha's desire to keep her safe. As far as ever Ruby knew, she could not fight, and so would probably just be in the way if she had gone. Oh well. She would just have to entertain herself while the others were gone. She walked to the table Weiss had singled out for her during her previous
visit, but the crayons and papers were gone, replaced by a mirror and some cosmetics. Entertaining herself might be harder than anticipated…

To Ruby, time seemed to pass more slowly when none of her friends were around. It was made much worse by the fact that she had nothing to do. She did track down a pencil and a blank paper, using them to sketch Pyrrha. On the reverse side she sketched Yang. Then she was out of paper. There was probably more elsewhere in the house, but she had been specifically instructed not to leave the room. Having just gotten on Weiss’ good side, she was not about to defy the order and risk her newfound friendship. So Ruby sat there, bored out of her mind. Then something caught her attention, a glint out of the corner of her eye. Scissors. Perfect!

Weiss, Pyrrha and Yang returned home. They had located the Beowolf, but it had been alone. The injured monster had apparently become separated from its pack, then had the misfortune to wander too close to civilization. Yang despatched it with ease, a single blast of fire, and Weiss had not even been forced to draw her magic projecting silver sword. It had been a total waste of time, but one for which Weiss was grateful. As predicted it had succeeded in getting her mind of her upcoming date. It actually put things in perspective for her. If she could handle being the village Huntress, surely she could handle a date.

Weiss pushed through the door, only to be met by a shocking sight. Ruby was sitting in a chair, blood streaming out of her arm and into the air, curling to form her name in a flowing cursive. Beside her sat a bloody pair of scissors. "What on Remnant are you doing?!" Weiss demanded.

"Waaaahhh!" Ruby was so startled she fell out of her chair. She completely lost control of her blood, sending it spraying all over the room, soaking all of Weiss' assorted dresses. "Oops."

"My...my...my dress!" Weiss raged. "My clothes! My date! It's all ruined! You demon I'll-"

Weiss reached for her sword but Pyrrha restrained her. "Weiss, I'll pay for everything." Pyrrha promised. "I'll replace everything."

"I'm sorry." Ruby cried, curling up in a ball on the floor. "I didn't mean to."

"Do you have any idea how hard it is to wash blood out of white clothes?!" Weiss shouted. "It's impossible! I may as well throw all this out! And now what am I going to wear for my date? You...you...you little monster!"

"Weiss, I'll lend you something, it'll be okay." Pyrrha encouraged.

"Yeah, like any of your clothes will fit me." Weiss groaned. "There's no time for tailoring either. I can't even go shopping in time!"

"Surely you've got something in another room." Pyrrha noted. "You didn't drag your entire wardrobe out here."

"Just...just get out of here, all of you." Weiss growled. "And you!" She stomped over to Ruby. "I never want to see you again!" Ruby sobbed into her own arms, convulsing. "Out!"

Yang walked over and picked Ruby up, carrying her toward the exit. "Weiss, she's really sorry." Pyrrha pleaded. "I'm really sorry."

Weiss gave Pyrrha an angry stare the likes of which the latter had never seen. "Leave!" Weiss screamed. "Now!"
Yang had to carry Ruby all the way home, and still she did not stop crying. It took hours for Blake, Yang and Pyrrha to finally calm her down. When Glynda made it home early that evening, Ruby was still bursting into occasional crying fits. Blake decided the best way to placate the girl was to distract her. "Hey Ruby, does it hurt when you cut yourself?" Blake asked.

"A little." Ruby replied. "Just for a second."

"It would probably hurt less if you used a sharper blade." Blake suggested. "And using just any old blade isn't a great idea either. I have no idea if you can even get an infection, but there's no reason to take the risk."

"I don't want to do it again anyway." Ruby sniffled.

"Oh, don't let today's little mistake put you off." Blake encouraged. "Accidents happen. Controlling your blood might be your greatest power. You shouldn't give up on that just because you stained Weiss' clothes."

"So what should I do about a blade?" Ruby asked.

"Use this." Blake declared. She swirled her hands around, a ball of darkness forming between them. With more gestures it flattened out, elongated, and finally took the shape of an ornate black dagger. Blake held one hand below it and it dropped down into her grasp. "It's made of shadow, so it'll always be sharp and clean. Try not to stab anyone else with it." She held it out to Ruby who took it from her. "Go ahead, give it a shot."

"Maybe I shouldn't." Ruby sighed.

"Blake-" Pyrrha started.

"Just give it a try." Blake insisted. "Hmm, maybe you could infuse some blood into it, decorate it a bit."

"Alright." Ruby relented. She jabbed the shadow dagger into her arm, producing an immediate spurt of blood. The blood hung in the air, swirling in place until Ruby held the dagger up to the red cloud. She moved the fingers on her other hand about and the blood fused with the dagger, forming bright swirling patterns all along its length.

"See, looks cool right?" Blake asked.

"Yeah, I guess." Ruby allowed.

"That's so metal." Yang praised from her position burning in the hearth.

"I still feel terrible." Ruby groaned. "Weiss must hate me now."

"I'm sure she'll forgive you." Pyrrha declared. "She's very...temperamental, but she has a good heart."

"Temperamental is an understatement." Glynda chuckled, walking into the lounge. "Weiss is like a raging tempest. Still, she'll probably forgive you. Tomorrow I'll work on washing your blood out of her clothes. Magic does wonders for stains." There was a knock at the door. "Ah, our guests are here, right on time."

"Guests?" Pyrrha asked.
"Hunters from Vale." Glynda explained. She opened the door. "Come in, come in." She returned to the lounge, followed by a thin man and a short woman with ginger hair. "Everyone, meet Ren and Nora." A series of waves and 'hello's followed.

"We're werewolves!" Nora faux growled.

"Yes, and what brings two werewolves to our little village?" Glynda asked.

"Ozpin sent us here on a hunt." Ren explained. "We're tracking a vampire."

"Vampires are delicious!" Nora cheered. "I can't wait 'til we get our hands on her."

"Hold on, vampirism isn't illegal." Glynda cautioned. "What grounds do you have for hunting this vampire?"

"She's a murderer." Ren replied. "She's been going from village to village, killing virgin maidens. She killed at least seven in and around Vale. According to our investigation, she arrived on the island about two weeks ago, and has been in or near this village for almost as long."

"Do you know anything about her?" Glynda asked. "Name, description, M.O.?"

"She seduces virgins, then when they're about to get freaky, she bites!" Nora exclaimed. "She feeds on them 'til they're dry."

"We don't have a name, just a series of aliases that are all out of date." Ren noted. "We have a fairly good physical description though. She's tall, dark-haired, with golden eyes. She's been described as sultry."

"Gods!" Pyrrha gasped. "Cindy! Weiss' date! That's almost exactly the description Weiss gave me! New in town, tall with black hair and golden eyes. She's out with her right now!"

"Where were they meeting?" Glynda asked.

"The tavern on the outskirts of town." Pyrrha replied.

"Let's go!" Nora yelled, about to race out the door.

"Wait, teleporting is quicker." Glynda advised. "Stand close to me."

Yang leapt from the hearth and flew beside Glynda. "Vampires don't like fire." She noted. "I'm coming along."

Pyrrha started to get up. "No, you Blake and Ruby stay here." Glynda ordered. "Get the medical equipment out...just in case." She gestured for the others to stand closer, almost touching. She spoke a spell, raised her hand, and a glyph appeared on the floor beneath the group. In a flash of light, they disappeared.

Weiss had arrived at the date feeling pretty low. With nearly her entire wardrobe soaked in blood, she had little choice of what to wear. She had gone with a rather simple black dress, the only presentable attire remaining. It made her feel like she was going to a funeral, and she feared her date would be just as sad. Then, to her surprise, Cindy praised her choice of clothing. Weiss was too shocked to really hear her, something about looking sexy in a "little black dress." Her date was flirtier than she had been during their previous encounters. Everything she did seemed to be charged with sexual energy, be it eating her dinner, drinking her wine, or even wiping her face with
a napkin. With the meal complete, Cindy invited Weiss to her room, conveniently located upstairs in the tavern. It was what Weiss had been hoping for - dreaming of - but she felt nervous and unready.

Upon entering the room, Weiss found herself pushed onto the bed, Cindy looming over her, a small smile and a hungry look burning in her golden eyes. Weiss trembled as Cindy cupped her face, barely containing her excitement, her anticipation. The first touch of their lips was like a lightning bolt, arcing through her very being, heat pooling in her abdomen, burning, intensifying. She felt Cindy's hand grasp the zipper of her dress, breaking the kiss only when it could be pulled no further. Grinning, Cindy reached for Weiss' shoulders, awaiting a shaky nod before pushing down the fabric straps, slowly revealing Weiss' meager bust.

Weiss blushed heavily, pulling her arms free, almost covering herself. Cindy caught her hands and pulled Weiss to her feet, the rest of the dress slipping to the floor. Weiss had neglected to wear anything beneath, and now stood bare before the other woman, who's eyes seemed to gleam brighter. "So beautiful." Cindy purred.

Weiss shuddered at her tone, husky, barely more than a whisper, dripping with arousal...almost as much as she was. "Y-you're far more-" She started.

"Nonsense!" Cindy cut in. She cupped Weiss' face and kissed her once more, nearly causing her knees to give out. "Do you want to know what I see?" Weiss nodded rapidly, entranced by Cindy's gaze. "Stand in front of the mirror."

"O-okay." Weiss managed. She took a few steps to stand before the full-length mirror in the corner of the room. It was embarrassing, looking at her naked form, all her flaws and inadequacies laid bare.

"Your skin, perfect, so pale, so pure, without so much as a single blemish." Cindy started. "Your legs, long, defined, beautiful." Weiss felt and saw herself blush as her arousal built. "Your core, toned, strong. Your collar bones, mmm..." Tears formed in Weiss' eyes. Never had anyone spoken such kind words about her physical form. "Your face, fair, so pretty. Your eyes, sparkling, deep, alluring." Cindy was close, almost whispering in her ear. "Your neck, long, slender." Weiss could feel Cindy's breath on her neck. "I love the taste of virgins."

Now Weiss could feel Cindy's breath, but not see her in the mirror. Something was wrong. A knot formed in the pit of her stomach. She turned her head, just enough to see Cindy inches away, then turned back to the mirror...nothing. Weiss inhaled sharply but was unable to do anything before Cindy's teeth clamped down on her neck. Weiss was paralyzed, the feeling of ice suddenly injected into her veins, left to watch in the mirror as twin crimson punctures appeared on her pale skin.

Weiss could do nothing but stare at her own terrified reflection, frozen in that horrible moment of realization, her only movements the occasional involuntary jerk. Cold hands slid over her skin, cupping her breasts, disturbingly gentle in their ministrations, as if she were made of glass. One began to drift lower, creeping past her stomach. Through the heat, the cold, Weiss could feel her life force ebbing away, see her eyes begin to gloss over. The world grew fuzzy, before slowly fading to black.
In a flash of light, Glynda, Yang, Ren and Nora appeared just in front of the tavern door. They burst into the busy establishment. A quick survey of the patrons indicated Weiss was not there. Glynda ran up to the bartender - a tall, bearded man - and grabbed him by the tie. "Was Weiss Schnee here?" She demanded.

"Uh yeah…" The bartender replied, confused by the sudden confrontation.

"Was she with someone?" Glynda asked. The man nodded. "Where are they now?"

"I think they went up to her room...2B." The bartender answered.

Glynda released the man and charged up the stairs with the others just behind her. Upon locating the door, Nora immediately kicked it in. There was the target, she could smell it. On the opposite side of the room, with their backs to the door, were two naked women, one with black hair, the other white. Nora rushed forward and leapt, transforming midair. Cindy spun around, holding Weiss in front of her as a human shield. Glynda acted quickly, casting a spell to place a shield in front of Weiss. Nora slammed into the shield and fell to the floor in a daze.

The vampire smirked, released Weiss ran for the window with inhuman speed. In a flash of color, Ren was at Weiss' side, catching her as she fell. At the same time, Yang followed the vampire, who had dived through the glass. Yang launched a fireball at the falling figure, but she burst into a cloud of mist just as the flames seared past, disappearing into the night. "Shit!" Yang raged. "Get back here you bitch!"

Glynda rushed to Weiss' side as Ren gently laid her motionless form on the floor. "She's very weak." He warned. "She doesn't have long." Weiss looked gaunt, deathly pale with sunken, lifeless eyes from which tears streaked her makeup. Ren took her hand in his own to reveal her fingers, tinged blue.

"We need to get her back to my house." Glynda declared. "I may be able to save her."

"We'll chase after Cin-" Nora started.

"No, you two stay here." Glynda ordered. "Yang?"

"What?!" Yang shouted. She was literally burning with fury, the flames almost entirely obscuring her figure. The floor beneath her and wall beside her began to char and crack, and the curtains around the window combusted from the heat.

"Get over here." Glynda commanded. Yang flew to Glynda's side, scooping up Weiss on the way. A glyph appeared on the floor beneath them, and they disappeared in a flash of light.

"I really hope we don't need to use this." Pyrrha declared as she and Blake set up the medical equipment around a cot in Glynda's basement. Ruby stood off to the side, near the stairs, watching with a mixture of curiosity and fear.

"You and me both." Blake agreed. She finished laying out various surgical implements and stepped back. "Now all we can do is-"
Light filled the basement. When it cleared Glynda stood beside Yang, who held a motionless and nude Weiss in her arms. "Is it all ready?" Glynda demanded. "Lay her on the cot." She ordered without waiting for an answer. Yang did as instructed, gently placing Weiss in position.

Blake immediately started connecting electrodes to Weiss. "Is she…" Pyrrha started.

"She's alive...but not for long unless we do something." Glynda replied.

"She's lost too much blood." Blake declared.

"I know." Glynda groaned. "Give me the syringe, the big one."

"What's the point?" Blake asked.

"I'm going to keep her alive." Glynda answered.

"You just said she..." Blake trailed off as Glynda reached for a vial of blood on a nearby shelf. "Gods…"

"Glynda, you can't." Pyrrha protested. "Not without consent."

"She'll never wake up unless I do it." Glynda noted. Blake handed her the syringe and Glynda began filling it from the vial.

"Then ask Winter." Pyrrha begged. Ruby edged forward with tears in her eyes, starting to reach out her hand toward Weiss.

"There's no time." Glynda shook her head.

"You can't!" Pyrrha shouted.

"I'm taking full responsibility." Glynda declared. "Now shut up and let me concentrate."

"But...I...you're right." Pyrrha relented. Ruby drew even with her.

"Yang, get Ruby out of here," Glynda ordered. "She's in the way." Yang nodded, grabbed Ruby by the hand, and guided her out of the basement. "Pyrrha, send a message to Winter."

"Yes ma'am." Pyrrha hung her head. She walked to the stairs, looking back one last time before climbing them.

"Blake, you can sense her heart, correct?" Glynda asked.

"Yes." Blake nodded.

"Guide me." Glynda requested. She held the syringe over Weiss' torso. Glynda took a deep breath before puncturing Weiss' pale skin. Blake put her hands over Glynda's, guiding the needle to Weiss' heart.

"There." Blake said.

"Gods forgive me." Glynda sighed. She pushed the plunger, injecting the red liquid directly into Weiss' heart. "Weiss, please forgive me."

Glynda slowly strode into the living room, Blake in tow. Pyrrha sat on the couch, Ruby curled into
her side looking lost. Yang blazed in the fireplace restlessly. Coming to a stop, Glynda took a deep breath, straightening her posture. "Is she still alive?" Pyrrha asked.

"In a manner of speaking, yes." Glynda nodded.

"Is Weiss gonna' be okay?" Ruby pressed.

Glynda clenched her teeth at Ruby's tone. She had already been subdued after the earlier incident, now she sounded unsteady, like a lost child. "Weiss will need our support, Ruby, when she awakes."

"Why?!" Yang demanded, bursting from the fireplace in a flash of light. She glared at Glynda. "What happened? What did you do?"

"That vampire had fed far too long." Glynda explained. "The venom in her system was hastening her blood loss. The only way I could save her was by completing the process."

"You turned her?" Yang gasped. Glynda swallowed, closing her eyes and nodding.

"What does that mean?" Ruby asked.

"It means...Weiss has become a vampire, Ruby." Pyrrha answered.

"Oh...uh...is that a bad thing?" Ruby asked.

"Vampires feed on humans, Ruby." Pyrrha continued. "It's...not a good way to live."

"But she's alive right?" Ruby pressed. "Vampires aren't all like Cindy, are they?"

"She's alive Ruby, yes, and no, she won't be evil." Pyrrha replied.

"Then what's the problem?" Ruby struggled to understand. "We can help her, right?"

Pyrrha sighed, looking up at Glynda again. "A vampire...killed her mother, Ruby." Glynda revealed.

"And you still turned her?!" Yang raged.

"I made a decision Yang." Glynda's nostrils flared and her voice became stern. "Are you telling me I should have let her die?"

"N-no...just...fuck..." Yang backed down. "I need to burn something. We should hunt down that parasitic bitch and chain her to a tree for a dozen sunrises!"

"We will discuss the matter of Cindy after Weiss has awoken." Glynda suggested. "We will all be needed, Yang. I need you to keep watch over Weiss' home, in case Cindy returns or someone comes with a request. Waking up a vampire is one thing. Waking up a vampire with lost customers is another."

"And if the bitch comes here?" Yang asked.

"I am more than capable of exterminating a lone vampire." Glynda declared.

"She doesn't deserve a quick death." Yang muttered.

"It won't be quick." Blake growled. Suddenly everyone noticed the room had grown much, much
darker. Blake was barely more than two slitted gold irises hanging in the shadows. "I'll save some for you, don't worry." Yang grinned, fiery teeth glinting in what little light was not being swallowed by Blake's rampant essence.

"Blake." Glynda admonished. The darkness receded and the room returned to its natural, warm light.

"I apologize." Blake bowed her head.

"Don't, we are all on edge tonight." Glynda waved her off. "We should retire. Weiss will not awake for several days, considering her condition. Yang, on your way to Weiss', please stop by the tavern to see Ren and Nora. They should have searched the vampire's room. I want to know if they found anything useful."

"Sure." Yang agreed. "Rubes, you gonna' be alright?"

"I think so, I just feel a little weird." Ruby replied.

Glynda took another breath, folding her arms behind her back. "I understand my decision may have shaken your faith in me. I only hope that, in time, it will work out for the better. Until then, I only ask that you remain strong, for Weiss. She is all that matters now." Glynda turned to leave.

"Can we see her?" Ruby asked.

Glynda paused, nodding. "You may."

Glynda left, and Blake followed, leaving the other three alone. Ruby looked to Pyrrha, who grimaced but nodded. Pyrrha stood, Ruby walking ahead of her, Yang in pursuit. Pyrrha made her way slowly, watching Ruby slip into the room, and Yang paused at the door before following. Pyrrha slowed to a halt herself. She had seen Weiss when she was brought in, her sickly and drained appearance chilling Pyrrha to the core. Never had she seen the ivory woman so weak. Weiss was a force of nature, going from calm, composed and elegant to a vicious huntress, slaughtering all manner of supernatural beasts with ruthless efficiency.

The thought of Weiss being at her prime, only to be seduced, violated and drained of life by the very thing she hated was terrifying to Pyrrha, and now Weiss was fated to become one herself. She wanted to be angry, at Glynda, at Cindy, and she was at first, but now she felt only misery and fear, feelings exacerbated when she entered the room to find Yang holding Ruby, who clutched Weiss' hand as her own shook.

"Pyrrha, why am I crying?" Ruby wept. "My eyes hurt, my chest hurts, I'm scared. Why does it hurt? Pyrrha!"

Pyrrha tore her eyes from Weiss' deathly visage, kneeling beside Ruby and Yang. She tried to smile reassuringly, cupping Ruby's face and dabbing at her eyes with her sleeve. "Human emotions can be overwhelming Ruby." Pyrrha explained. "We shiver when we feel fear, and we cry when we feel pain. Sometimes it's physical, sometimes emotional. You care for Weiss, and seeing her this way makes you sad. It makes me sad too. It's okay to be sad Ruby."

"The last thing I did was make her angry." Ruby sniffled, looking back to Weiss. "She just wanted to have a good day, and it only got worse."

"Hey, none of us could have known that this would happen." Yang encouraged.

"I just wanted her to like me." Ruby sobbed.
"She will Ruby, when she wakes up." Pyrrha promised. "We'll all be here for her, and when she's better, you two can try again. A little bit of bad luck can be forgiven."

"I think we've had more than a little at this point." Yang mumbled.

"Regardless, have faith Ruby." Pyrrha forced a smile, for Ruby's sake. "Things will work out, I promise."

Blake closed the door to Glynda's bedroom and again let her essence run free. What little light remained in the room was almost extinguished. Glynda, sitting on her bed, remained untouched. Blake would never willingly obscure her visage, she loved her far too dearly for that, her mistress, her partner for life, strong and beautiful, even as her defenses crumbled, stoic expression falling along with her blond hair, freed from its constricting bun.

"Did I make the right choice Blake?" Glynda asked.

Blake frowned, slinking forward to climb into her mistress' lap. Technically, Glynda was no longer her mistress, she forsook all power over Blake rather than compromise her morals. It was one of many things Blake adored about her, and it was the source of her current misery. Glynda took her vows to heart. She refused to compromise them when given the choice, and tonight that choice had potentially caused farm more harm in the process. And it was breaking her.

"Weiss is strong." Blake declared. "She will pull through."

"I didn't ask if she will pull through." Glynda pressed. "I asked if I made the right choice." Her voice cracked as Blake cupped her face, bumping their foreheads together, allowing her essence to wash over both of them. The void surrounded and caressed Glynda, like a thousand tiny feathers brushing away her pain. She felt her eyes sting, and Blake kissed away the tears.

"Weiss is alive." Blake noted. "Because of you she has the opportunity to choose her own fate. In my eyes you are her savior, just as you were mine."

Glynda stifled a sob, reaching to clutch at Blake's back, the shadows parting until bare skin made contact. Glynda felt her clothes dissolve beneath the soundless onslaught, and a gentle purring became evident. As they sat there in the dark, nought but shadow between them, Glynda allowed herself to break, allowing the essence all around her to consume her anguish. Outside, she had to be strong, infallible, an example and a role model to all, Glynda the Good, the very model of a Master Witch. But in here, in Blake's arms, she could just be Glynda the Human, pained, guilty, and so very flawed.

"I love you Blake, don't you ever forget that." Glynda managed.

Blake wiped away the last of Glynda's tears and kissed her, slowly and lovingly. "Not in an eternity, my love."

Pyrrha sat staring out the window. She probably should have been training, but she was not in the mood. She was not interested in doing anything really. The others in the house seemed to feel the same. Glynda had locked herself away in her study, and Blake and Ruby sat silently at Weiss' bedside. Ren and Nora had come and gone, returning to the tavern. They had reported their findings, or lack thereof, to Glynda. Their attempts to find any clues in Cindy's room had come up empty, the slightest touch causing her belongings to collapse into piles of sand. It also proved impossible to follow her, as her transformation into mist had successfully obscured her scent and
left no tracks.

Everything was going wrong. Even the weather seemed unsettled by events. The sky was filled with dark and foreboding clouds, and the way the trees whipped about spoke to the high winds. The midday darkness warped any sense of time. Pyrrha could have been sitting by the window for a few hours as easily as a few minutes. Soon it would begin to rain and the temperature would drop precipitously. This sort of storm was common on Patch, though they usually came in the middle of winter rather than the end of autumn. It could be days before anyone saw the sun. The thought further dampened Pyrrha’s spirits. Weiss would never get to enjoy its warmth again.

Before long a lonely figure appeared on the path leading to the house. Tall, wrapped in a blue cloak, sword at the hip, it had to be Winter. Pyrrha felt her gut knot with dread. To say Winter would be unhappy was a massive understatement. She would be devastated, or livid, or both. Pyrrha had not told her much in her message, just that Weiss had been critically hurt and Winter should come as quickly as possible. Given her history, the truth would be particularly difficult. Pyrrha did not want to be the one to tell her.

Winter knocked on the door. Pyrrha, fighting the urge to flee, was already on her feet, heading to answer it. She stood just behind it and took a deep breath. She plastered on a smile and opened the door. It was hard not to gasp when she got a good look at Winter. Weiss sister looked haggard, her hair a mess beneath the cloak, dark circles surrounding her eyes, the usual intensity in those eyes absent. Pyrrha had never seen Winter in such a state. Winter lived what was essentially the life of a hermit, alone in her secluded cabin, only engaging with civilization when she was sought out. Even so, she took great pride in her appearance.

"Hello Winter." Pyrrha greeted, trying to sound as cheerful as possible. "How was-"

"Where is my sister?" Winter cut her off. Her voice was hoarse.

"Follow me." Pyrrha sighed. She started up the stairs to the second floor, Winter in tow.

Winter pushed the hood of her cloak back, letting her messy hair fall free. "What happened?" She asked.

"Weiss was...seduced and attacked by a vampire." Pyrrha replied. They arrived at the door and she paused a moment before opening it. "Glynda got there before she was fully exsanguinated but..."

Winter entered the room, ignoring Blake and the unknown girl who sat opposite. She approached the bed, looking Weiss over. Weiss looked disturbingly pale and gaunt. Her arms lie atop the blankets, one punctured by an IV that fed red liquid into her. Winter grabbed her other hand. Weiss was cold, so cold. "Will she recover?" Winter asked.

"In a manner of speaking, yes." Blake replied.

"What does that mean?" Winter pressed. No one said anything. Pyrrha and the girl looked away, but Blake kept her gaze locked. "What did you do to her?"

"Well...the thing is...she was very close to death..." Pyrrha struggled.

"She was going to die." Blake took over. "Dead already to all intents and purposes. She'd lost too much blood. Without extreme measures, she wouldn't have made it."

"What did you do?!" Winter demanded.

"There was already venom in her system." Blake noted. "We simply completed the
"You turned her?!" Winter shouted. She clenched her teeth. After giving Weiss' hand one more squeeze, she released her and stood, balling her fists. "Do you have...where's Glynda?"

"In her study." Blake replied.

Winter pushed past Pyrrha and out of the room. She stomped down the hallway, throwing open the door to Glynda's study. "You bitch." She seethed. "I trusted you...I trusted you to keep an eye on her, to keep her safe, and you...you turned her into a monster." Glynda was writing something and did not look up from her work. "You know what happened to our mother. And she wasn't just killed by some random vampire, she was killed by a trusted friend! A friend who lost control! What if Weiss loses control? Will you strike her down? Will you let her go on a rampage, let her spread the suffering to even more innocents? Answer me!"

"I wouldn't have done it if there was any other option." Glynda declared, her voice quiet and wavering. "It was turn her or let her die."

"You sentenced her to a fate worse than death!" Winter accused.

"That's for her to choose." Glynda sighed. "At least now she has a chance to decide for herself." Glynda finally put her pen down and turned to face Winter. "I'm writing her a guide to her condition. Now, are you going to keep yelling at me, or are you going to help make sure your sister knows as much as possible?"

"You know there's nothing I can add that you don't already know." Winter noted. "I'm going to her house. I'll take over her responsibilities until she recovers. Don't think this conversation is over."

"I don't." Glynda shook her head. "I just have one request."

"You're not in a position to ask anything of me." Winter hissed.

"I know." Glynda confirmed. "But that's the crux of it. Do not thrust any blame, any anger, any resentment, onto the others. What happened is my responsibility and mine alone. If you must scream at someone, if you must lash out, make me your target. I deserve it. They don't."

"Very well." Winter grumbled. She turned to leave but paused and turned back. "Who is that girl at my sister's bedside?"

"That's Ruby." Glynda replied. "She's a...peculiar summon. Her relationship with Weiss has not been a smooth one, but she's devastated by her condition. She has not left your sister's side since."

"Hmm..." Winter grunted. With that she made good her exit, not saying a word to any of the others.
Winter arrived before the door to Weiss' house. She had the key, and fumbled around her pocket for it. To her surprise, the door opened before she could locate the key. A blonde woman stood before her in the doorway. "Who are you?" Winter asked. "And what are you doing here?"

"I'm Yang, aspect of fire, daughter of the Dragon God of Fire." She replied. "Glynda asked me to watch the house and handle Weiss' Huntress requests until she recovers. You must be her sister."

"I am." Winter confirmed.

Rather than leaving as Winter had hoped, Yang retreated into the house. Winter sighed and followed. "I did a little cleaning." Yang explained. "Ruby had a little accident and got some blood on some of Weiss' clothes. I figured she wouldn't want to see them, so I boxed them up. I'll take 'em to Glynda to see if she can do anything to clean them. I also tidied up some of the side rooms. They were a real mess."

"Well...thank you." Winter allowed. "You can go now. I'll take it from here."

"You sure?" Yang asked. "You look like you could use some company. Come on, I know how to have a good time."

"I'm not in the mood." Winter grumbled.

"So frosty. just like Weiss." Yang observed.

"Well. I wanted to help."

"Alright, alright, I'll go." Yang threw up her hands. She walked to the boxes stacked beside the door and picked them up. She paused before crossing the threshold. "You sure?"

"Get the fuck out!" Winter screamed. Yang shook her head and left. Winter rushed over the slam the door behind her. She stood there seething for a moment, breathing heavily through gritted teeth. After taking a moment to calm herself, without much success, Winter sat on the couch. As she sat, surrounded by Weiss' things, her rage faded, replaced by a rising tide of depression. Weiss, her little sister, the person she cared about more than any other, was never going to be the same. Winter could not imagine Weiss would ever be happy again. Though she tried to fight it, Winter broke down, sobbing into her hands.

"Is she always that much of a bitch?" Yang grumbled as she tossed the boxes full of clothes onto the floor.

"Winter has always been a bit...cold." Pyrrha admitted. "But please go easy on her, this situation is harder on her than any of us."

"I just try to brighten her day a bit, and I get yelled at." Yang complained. "Where's Glynda? She said she might be able to clean Weiss' clothes."

"She's upstairs in her study." Pyrrha replied. "Perhaps you can ask Ruby to help. She's been looking for something to do to assist Weiss."
"I'll let her know." Yang nodded. She abandoned her solid form and tore up the stairs as a cloud of flame, reforming at the door to Glynda's study. "I brought Weiss' bloody clothes for you to try to clean."

Glynda finished writing something and turned around. "I suppose my eyes can use a break...not to mention my fingers." She sighed. Yang flashed away to get Ruby as Glynda trudged into the hallway, then down the stairs and into the living room. She picked up one of the boxes and headed for the basement. Glynda spotted Ruby out of the corner of her eye. The strange summon picked up the other box and followed Glynda down.

Without a word, Ruby went to work helping Glynda unpack the boxes. She occasionally teared up, sometimes sniffing, a contrast to Glynda's stoic facade. Once everything was laid out, Glynda started mixing chemicals. "Um...Glynda...I can control my blood." Ruby finally spoke up. "Why don't I just pull it off the clothes?"

"Some of the fabric is quite delicate." Glynda warned. "You might accidentally damage it."

"Oh...I don't want to make things worse than they already are...but I want to help." Ruby sighed.

"I'm mixing up some magical cleaner." Glynda declared. "You can help scrub it in." She finished the first vial. "Bring me a dress."

Ruby picked up a dress. She looked at it and frowned. It was the one Weiss had intended to wear for her date. Ruby reached out and touched the stain. Suddenly, the blood was sucked out of the fabric, absorbed into her hand. "Gah!" Ruby shrieked, dropping the dress.

"Interesting…" Glynda rubbed her chin. "I guess you can absorb blood too. Try on another dress."

"What if I damage it?" Ruby asked.

"This is an experiment." Glynda noted. "I'll take full responsibility."

"Well...alright." Ruby agreed. She picked up another dress and touched the stain. The result was the same, as her touch absorbed the blood. It did no damage to the fabric. "This is kinda' cool."

"Hmm...another experiment." Glynda encouraged. She picked up a pin and pricked her own finger, then wiped the blood on a nearby towel. "Try touching this." Glynda passed the bloody towel to Ruby.

"Uh...okay." Ruby hesitated. She took the towel from Glynda and touched the bloodstain, but nothing happened. "Oh...it didn't work."

"One more thing." Glynda said. She grabbed a vial from a nearby shelf, pouring a little bit of red liquid from it onto the towel. "Try that."

Ruby touched the new stain and the blood was absorbed into her hand. "It worked!" Ruby exclaimed. "Was that one of the samples I gave?"

"No." Glynda replied. "That's a blood sample from Pyrrha."

"So...what does it all mean?" Ruby asked.

"It means you can control Pyrrha's blood too." Glynda explained. "I knew your blood was more or less identical, but this is still something of a surprise. I guess your summoning has linked the two of you more closely than I anticipated. Just be careful with your power and everything should be
"After we finish cleaning the dresses, what should I do?" Ruby asked. She picked up another garment and absorbed the blood from it. "I want to help Weiss, but all I've been able to do is sit around and wait. It's really hard."

"Perhaps you could do something to make the room more comfortable for her." Glynda suggested. "She's going to be in for a nasty shock when she regains consciousness. If her surroundings are more friendly, perhaps it will lessen the blow."

Ruby nodded and smiled. "That's a great idea!"

Prancing through the woods, "Cindy" was euphoric. Red clouded her vision, heart beating harder than it ever had before. So long had she gone without pure blood, without the thrill of the hunt, the anticipation, the craving all but driving her insane. The moment Weiss' blood had touched her tongue, the world ceased to exist, and even now she was barely aware of her surroundings. She slaughtered something, it may have been a bear, or an Ursa, it did not matter. Whatever it was, it wasn't now, and she could smell her destination. Mint hung upon the air, three heartbeats growing stronger, one slow, one fast, and the loudest among them, steady, suddenly hitching.

"Cinder!" Emerald cheered. From the mouth of the cave, a human flew. Clad in a red silk robe, dark skinned, though her blood was no less vibrant, nor was her hair, as brilliant in color as smell, mint green and gleaming in the moonlight. She halted, only to retreat as Cinder advanced. "Mistress, forgive me for leaving the cave. Mercury found himself a toy, and they keep-" Cinder kissed Emerald, arms snaking around her body, pulling them together as Cinder borderline devoured her mouth, before moving down her throat. "Hah, I take it things went well."

Cinder chuckled against Emerald's pulse point, nipping lightly before picking her up. Emerald's legs wrapped around her waist as golden eyes bored into her. "I was interrupted." Cinder declared. "Though it only added to my excitement. Weiss was truly worth the wait."

"Are we in danger?" Emerald asked.

Cinder chuckled again, the feeling of their shared pulse sending waves of excitement through her being. She trailed her tongue along Emerald's jawline, drawing a shudder from her human. "Hardly my sweet." Cinder replied. "We'll lay low and...play for a while. They'll grow complacent, thinking us fled. The Huntsmen will move on, and we can be free." Emerald's pulse increased, body heat like a furnace against Cinder's skin, breath heavy, nethers dripping, the smell of arousal like a drug to Cinder's heightened senses, her pupils dilated, naught but a thin ring of gold left of her irises. Emerald was putty in her arms, just as she belonged.

"Y-yes mistress...of course, I apologize for doubting." Emerald stammered. "I was merely worried. This town's witch is powerful-hng?"

Cinder reached beneath Emerald's robe, rubbing the delicate, exposed petals within, drawing amusing whimpers from her pet. It was adorable, her concern, her fears, her loyalty, so genuine, so unfiltered, never anything less than honest, even in fear of angering her mistress. Emerald was truly Cinder's one constant. Even Mercury was little more than a hanger on, muscle, bodyguard for her pet. Once again, Cinder was tempted to give in, to turn her beloved pet, to make her equal, to make her strong. And once again she resisted. Now was not the time. The hunt took precedence. She would need Emerald's blood for the months to come. Perhaps next time, perhaps then she would be sated.
"So long as you remain by my side, you need never worry, I will protect you." Cinder promised.

Emerald cried out, Cinder's strong fingers playing her body like an instrument, the melodies of her voice the music. "Please...mistress...Cinder...let me serve you." Emerald begged.

Cinder kissed Emerald silent. She had taken much from Emerald, more than any other conquest, any pet. It was selfish. No matter her purpose, humans had limits, and Emerald had surpassed her own many times. Vampires were good to their cattle, Cinder was no exception. "Shh, we have all the time in the world my sweet." Cinder whispered. Tonight, she would be selfless.

Pyrrha slipped on her shoes, then threw on a raincoat. She was heading out. Now that Winter had arrived and Weiss' condition was stable, Pyrrha had to inform two others of her condition. Velvet was a good friend, and needed to be told what had happened. Plus, Weiss would need some of her blood. Port had to be told as well. He was in charge of the village's defense, and with Weiss in no condition to handle her duties, something must be done, just in case. As Pyrrha reached for the doorknob, she heard footsteps approaching. Turning around, she spotted Ruby. It was strange to see her away from Weiss' bedside.

"Do you need something?" Pyrrha asked.

"Um, could you take me to Weiss' house?" Ruby requested.

"Of course." Pyrrha nodded. "Why?"

"Glynda said things would be hard for Weiss when she woke up." Ruby noted. "She said maybe if I made the room more comfortable for her, it would help. I thought I could bring some things from her house, to make the room more...uh...Weissy."

"That's a wonderful idea." Pyrrha smiled, forcing a cheerful tone for Ruby's sake. "You should take a coat, the weather is quite bad." The storm that had announced its approach with wind the day before had arrived in full force, with pouring rain and even more violent winds.

Ruby grabbed a coat - Blake's - from the rack beside the door, and threw it over her shoulders. "Let's go!"

Pyrrha left Ruby in front of Weiss' house, heading for Velvet's shop. Even with heavy coats, both were cold and soaked by the winds and rain. Ruby rushed along the path, ducking beneath the awning that shielded Weiss' front door. She hesitated for a moment, then knocked as she had seen Pyrrha do before. Ruby was unsure of what to do next, but before she could decide the door opened, revealing Winter. Her clothes and hair were neater than they had been the day before, but subtle tear tracks still marked her face.

"Ruby, right?" Winter asked.

"Yeah, I-" Ruby started.

"What do you want?" Winter cut her off.

"I wanted to make Weiss' room more comfortable, so she won't be as sad when she wakes up." Ruby explained. "I thought if I grabbed a few things from her house, it would help."

"Ruby, what are you?" Winter asked. "Glynda failed to give me a straight answer."
"I...well, I don't know." Ruby replied. "Pyrrha was doing some sort of ritual, and I just, kind of, appeared. All I remember from before that is having a mom, and knowing Yang."

"I've never met a summon unaware of what it was." Winter declared. "I am...was a Templar. I can sense things normal people can't. I can tell that you're something powerful, unnatural. I don't trust you, and I don't want you having anything to do with my sister."

"But-" Ruby tried to protest. Winter slammed the door in her face.

With a vial of Velvet's blood - a generous donation - in her pocket, Pyrrha exited the shop. She found Ruby waiting outside, staring at the ground as the rain pounded her coat. "Ruby, are you okay?" Pyrrha asked. "What happened?"

"I don't think Winter likes me very much." Ruby sighed.

"She has the effect on people." Pyrrha noted. "Whatever warm center Weiss managed to salvage from her wreck of a family, Winter never found."

"She said some mean things, that she didn't want me to be around Weiss." Ruby continued.

"Winter's just...this whole situation is really hard for her." Pyrrha laid a hand on Ruby's shoulder. Ruby looked up and Pyrrha met her with a smile. "Don't take it to heart."

"Okay." Ruby managed a smile.

"Let's go talk to Port." Pyrrha said.

Pyrrha led Ruby through the village to Port's forge. The man was inside, working as usual. The pair entered, ringing the bell attached to the door. Port looked up, smiling when he saw them. "Welcome back!" He boomed. "What brings the two of you here on a day like this?"

"Not good news, unfortunately." Pyrrha replied. Port put his work aside. "Weiss has been...severely injured. She was attacked by a vampire...she almost died. Glynda...Glynda had to turn her. It was the only way to keep her alive. She should recover physically, and Winter has taken over her Huntress duties for the time being. But..."

"You don't know if she'll ever recover psychologically." Port finished for her. "And Winter will not remain here forever."

"Yes, exactly." Pyrrha confirmed. "Do you have some kind of contingency plan? Are any of the Hunstmen under your tutelage ready?"

"None of my students are ready just yet." Port shook his head. "Well, there is one." He smirked and reached under the counter. With the clatter of metal, he retrieved a spear and shield, placing them before Pyrrha. "You were ready back then, and your training as a witch has only made you more powerful. Please, take up your arms, be our defender while Weiss cannot."

"I...I can't, I...what happened…" Pyrrha stammered.

"You can." Port insisted. "You are strong, smart, talented beyond measure. What happened that day was tragic, but you cannot let it hold you back. This village needs you, now more than ever. Be the Huntress, the hero we need! The hero you were always destined to be!"

"I...I will." Pyrrha sighed. "But only as long as I'm needed."
"Very good." Port smiled. Pyrrha approached the counter, looking over the spear and shield placed there for a moment. She picked up the shield, slipped her arm through leather strap and grabbed the handle on the back. After waving it back and forth, getting a feel for the weight, she held it at her side, then picked up the spear with her right hand. Pyrrha took up a fighting stance, ducking behind the shield and holding the spear over the top. "It suits you."

"I wish I could feel the same way." Pyrrha frowned. She slung the shield over her back, then turned to Ruby. "Let's go home."

"Just a moment." Port called. "I'm willing to donate blood for Weiss."

Pyrrha turned back. "Thank you. Just come by the house whenever you're ready."

Ruby and Pyrrha trudged home through the storm. Pyrrha's shield made a remarkably good umbrella substitute, even if the sound of rain pounding it was deafening. When they reached the house, Ruby headed for the lounge. Pyrrha grabbed a towel from the closet before joining her. With a frown and sadness in her eyes that Ruby had never seen before, Pyrrha carefully dried her spear and shield. Even Yang noticed.

"Hey Pyr, you alright?" Yang asked from the hearth, where she restlessly burned away at some logs. Pyrrha just shook her head.

"Pyrrha, what's wrong?" Ruby asked. "You and Port said something happened, is that it? What happened?"

"I don't want to talk about it." Pyrrha mumbled.

"Might make you feel better." Yang suggested. "When Ruby was a sprite, telling her about my problems always helped, and she couldn't even talk back." Pyrrha remained silent.

"Don't you think Ruby should know?" Glynda asked from the doorway. "It is why you were performing that ritual, isn't it?"

"G-Glynda..." Pyrrha stammered. "B-but I-"

"I know it hurts." Glynda declared. "But she deserves to know."

"I...fine, you're right." Pyrrha sighed.

"Do you want me to leave or..." Yang started.

"No, that's alright." Pyrrha shook her head. "Everyone else knows. It's only fair that you do too."
"When...when I was young, I trained to be a Huntress." Pyrrha started. "Port was the village Huntsman for a long time, but Winter had arrived. She did that for a few years until Weiss replaced her. Anyway, that allowed Port to retire and start training the next generation. I...I guess I was his star pupil. There were four of us, and we were all young. I was the oldest at fourteen, and Port made me the team leader. The others were Coral, just a few weeks younger than me, Jaune, about a year younger, and Helia, about the same age as Jaune. Mostly we just fought weak creatures Glynda summoned as our training, along with some sparring and lots of physical fitness. Even before Port retired, we were already training, just not as intensively.

"After a few months of full time training, Port decided we were ready for a real mission. It was supposed to be easy, just a small pack of Beowolves near one of the roads running from the village to the coast. I felt like we were ready too...well, except for Jaune. He was really committed, but he'd never really shown any talent. Still, it should have been easy enough for the other three of us to handle on our own, so he could watch and learn. Port gave us a flare gun, to shoot off if we got into trouble, but none of us expected to need help.

"We found the Beowolves, right where they were expected to be. Taking them out was pretty easy. Coral got a gash on his leg, but otherwise we were fine. Jaune even managed to take out one of the wounded beasts. He was so proud...and I was happy for him. He was always trying to impress me...I think maybe he had a crush on me…"

"What's a crush?" Ruby asked.

"Oh, um...a crush is a...hmm...an immature romantic attraction." Pyrrha explained. "Basically he liked me."

"Did you have a crush on him?" Ruby asked.

"I wasn't interested." Pyrrha sighed. "I was too polite to rebuff him, but...it doesn't matter. We killed the last of the Beowolves, then spread out to check for stragglers. Coral and Helia went one way, Jaune and I went the other. Something didn't feel right, but I thought I was just being paranoid. Then Coral screamed. I rushed back toward him, just in time to find Helia fighting a huge Ursa. Coral's arm was mangled, and Helia wasn't doing well. The creature was clearly far too powerful for us to handle. It knocked Helia down and stomped on her. I fired the flare, and that drew the Ursa's attention, just as I'd hoped.

"It charged at me, and I blocked with my shield, but the impact was powerful enough to lift me off the ground. I landed awkwardly, and my counterattack was sloppy. The Ursa caught my spear with its teeth and pulled it away from me. It bit down and bent it in half. It didn't hold up, bashing me with its arms as I blocked with my shield. I wasn't strong enough. It was pounding me into the ground, my shield was falling apart...I didn't have much time. I saw a flash of movement out of the corner of my eye and the Ursa stopped. I heard grunting, and turned to see Jaune hacking at the beast with his sword.

"Jaune was cutting a lot, but he wasn't cutting deep. The Ursa roared, swung its arm around, and sent him flying into the forest. He dropped his sword as he sailed through the air, and I was able to pick it up. The Ursa stalked in the direction he'd gone, and I guess it forgot about me. I jumped on to its back, and stabbed it in the neck with Jaune's sword. It flailed a bit and managed to knock me
off. I hit my head, hard, but it only took a few more steps before falling dead.

"I was feeling dizzy, and struggling to keep my balance. I headed for Jaune, I could hear him groaning. When I found him he was...he...there was a fallen tree, and he was impaled through the abdomen on a broken branch." Pyrrha stifled a sob as tears flowed from her eyes. "I made it to him and collapsed. I apologized, for failing him, for everything...and he just told me he loved me. He said he just wanted to hear me say I loved him. I...I couldn't say it. I knew he was fading but...I just couldn't say it. He took a deep breath, then stilled. I lost consciousness a few seconds later.

"When I regained consciousness I was in the hospital. I had a few broken bones, but overall I was in pretty good shape. The others...weren't so lucky. Coral had to have his arm amputated. Helia's back was broken, and even though she wasn't paralyzed, she was never the same. Jaune...Jaune was dead. I blamed myself. I was supposed to be the leader, I was responsible for their safety, and...I failed, when they needed me most. I felt unfit to be a Huntress, so when I recovered, I didn't return to training. Instead I went to Glynda to train as a witch."

"Why would you train as a witch instead?" Yang asked.

"I still wanted to help the village, to protect people, and I had some magical talent." Pyrrha replied. "That and...witches have a power...one no others possess...they can...they can raise the dead. I trained and trained so that one day I could resurrect Jaune. I couldn't accept his death, I couldn't accept my failure, and it was the only way I could think of to make it right. That's what I was doing when I summoned you, Ruby. I was trying to raise him, but I guess something went wrong, and you appeared instead."

"You were trying to raise the dead?" Yang gasped. "Are you insane?! No one fucks with Death! My dad's a god and he wouldn't!"

"I know, it was stupid of me, selfish." Pyrrha sighed. "But I had to at least try. In the end it didn't work, so I guess it doesn't really matter."

"Pyrrha...I'm so sorry." Ruby sniffled. "If I could trade places with Jaune or summon him I would-"

"No, that's alright." Pyrrha cut her off. "I'm...I'm actually happy you appeared instead. New life instead of death...perhaps that's why you're here, to help me move on. Maybe I'm supposed to protect you, teach you, in his stead. I failed him, but I won't fail you." She held her spear and shield before her. "I'll protect this village too, as a witch and a Huntress, and I'll help Weiss overcome her condition!"

"Take it easy." Yang advised. "You're only human. Don't overextend yourself. You won't do anyone any good if you don't keep within your limits."

"You're right." Pyrrha pulled back. "I need to know my limitations, or I'll only repeat my mistakes. Thank you, both of you."

"Any time." Yang smiled.

"Yeah, we're here to help you too." Ruby declared. "We'll all help each other."

"Like a family." Yang added.

"Like a family..." Pyrrha repeated. "I like the sound of that."

Seemingly, death was not so bad.
The fear, the pain, the jagged pieces of her broken heart faded away to be replaced by sheer nothingness. Void, dark and unending, like an ocean, casting her adrift, it was peaceful, almost blissful, if only it were not so cold, if only she could breathe...breathe? Why was she unable to breathe? Why did she need to breathe? She was dead, was she not? Was this hell? Was she doomed to an eternity of suffocation in an endless void?

Had she not been noble enough in life? She had served the people, protecting them with her life, mixing and brewing salves, tonics and creams to sell at their markets. Sure, she could be somewhat cold, snippy and quick to anger, it ran in the family but she had been trying to curb those habits. And yes, perhaps her prices were a tad too shrewd, but the ingredients were expensive and difficult to gather. Grimm teeth in particular were difficult, with so many applications, yet so hard to preserve. But that was beside the point!

Was this the fate that awaited those killed by vampires? Were the gods so cruel as to punish those who fell prey to their seduction? Was that not torture enough? Did Willow meet the same fate, betrayed, drained of life, and then thrown into this realm, a nightmare? She did not deserve this, Weiss did not deserve this, no one deserved this. It was so cold, so crushing, the isolation and suffocation...all she wanted to do was breathe.

"Please gods, please." Weiss rasped into the void. "Let me breathe, just once more, just once m-"

Weiss awoke.

Noise, beating, breathing, chirping, scuffling of nervous feet, crackling of flame, wind whipping through the trees, rain pounding the ground. Smell, overwhelming fragrance, lilies, daisies, lavender, roses, so much, suffocating even as she gulped in air as though she were surfacing from a deep dive. The sheer sensory overload left her lost. Scrambling to cover her ears, she felt the fabric of the pillow, wrapping it around her head and muffling the world.

Slowly, Weiss calmed, her hunger for oxygen diminishing, continually, until she felt barely any need to breathe at all. The floral scents lingered, heavy upon the air, and the roar that had deafened her was but a dull rumble now, barely increasing as she let the pillow fall from her head. Finally, she opened her eyes to take in the room. It was dark, except it was not. She could see everything, clear as day, but still she knew it was dark. There were no candles, no lamps, and the window was shut, all light blocked by a curtain, pinned around the edges to complete the blackout.

"Weiss." A voice called.

Weiss flinched, looking to her left to meet golden eyes, pale faced with ebony hair. Weiss' first reaction was fear, but then it dawned on her that it was not Cindy's voice, and this was not her face. Her cheeks were softer, eyes larger, her lips in a perpetual frown as if unimpressed by the world. "Blake?"

"How do you feel?" Blake asked.

Weiss shivered, suddenly aware of the frigid...feel of her being. "Cold...where is Cindy?"

"We don't know." Blake replied. "She fled upon our arrival. Yang and the Huntsmen have been searching for her."

"Huntsmen?" Weiss asked. Blake nodded. "What...what happened, exactly?"

"Glynda received two Huntsmen as guests, Ren and Nora, werewolves both." Blake explained. "They were tracking a vampire, all the way from Vale. She would hunt, seduce, then kill virgin
maidens, going from village to village for new prey. They didn't have a name, just a description: 'tall, dark haired, golden eyes.' Weiss stared past Blake, fixating on a crack in the wall, but nodded. "Pyrrha made the connection, and told us where you were meeting Cindy. Glynda, Yang and the Huntsmen teleported, but arrived too late. Cindy was already feeding."

Weiss flinched, the phantom pains of fangs flaring in her neck. She reached up to find two small scars, flinching again at her own frigid touch, its familiarity sending a shock down her spine.

"Nora tried to take her, but Cindy used you as a shield." Blake continued. "Glynda protected you, but in the process Cindy got away, fleeing through the window and dissipating into mist. With her gone, they turned to you, bringing you back for treatment but...you'd lost too much blood, Weiss. Glynda had to make a decision. She could let you die, breaking her word, or she could turn you, and face the consequences when you awoke."

Weiss felt a chill descend upon her shoulders, like being submerged once more in that unfeeling void. "You turned me?" Blake nodded, chewing her lip, looking distinctly more somber than she ever had before. "Oh." Weiss felt many things in that moment. Hatred, for Cindy. Anger, at Glynda. Fear, for her soul. Mourning, for her humanity. But it would not do to let this overwhelm her, now more than ever she needed to maintain her composure. She was a vampire...gods she wished she was not so cold. "May I have another blanket please?"

Blake nodded, standing and approaching the door. Even Blake's light steps were audible to Weiss now. The light almost blinded Weiss when Blake opened the door, and she was forced to squint, making out a flash of red. "Ruby." Blake called.

"Is she okay?" Ruby asked.

"Weiss is cold, can you fetch some blankets for her?" Blake requested.

"Sure, is there anything else I can do?" Ruby pressed.

"Not yet, just give me that." Blake replied. Ruby handed Blake something Weiss could not make out through her still adjusting vision. Weiss surmised it was a book, based on the shape and the smell of leather.

"What happens now?" Weiss asked.

Blake returned to her seat beside the bed, placing the book in Weiss' lap. "That is up to you." She answered. "Glynda wished for you to have a choice: live as a vampire, or die by your own hand."

Weiss was taken aback by the bluntness of the statement, but swallowed her shock. "Absolutely not. I am alive, regardless of my soul and body."

"Good, Ruby would have been devastated." Blake smirked.

"That dolt still cares about me?" Weiss raised a curious eyebrow.

"Her faith in you has been unwavering." Blake declared. "She has hardly left your side these past few days."

"Even after my treatment of her?" Weiss sighed.

"If anything, it made her more determined to earn your approval." Blake noted.

Weiss scoffed, shaking her head. She felt a smile tug at her lips for the first time. A loud knock,
probably light but amplified by her vampiric senses, rung from the door. "Come in."

The door opened slowly, and Weiss shielded her eyes until it shut again. The sight before her was comical, a large pile of blankets almost dwarfing the girl carrying them, silver eyes peeking over the top. "Hey Weiss, I didn't know where the blankets were so I took the ones off mine and Pyrrha's bed."

"Thank you Ruby." Weiss said. She took a thick maroon blanket from the pile, wrapping it tightly around herself as Ruby lay the others across her lap. Weiss felt less cold, but the chill seemed internal. Still, Ruby's blanket smelt nice, like roses, all the flowers really. Weiss took them in properly for the first time, a dozen bouquets of different species, all vibrant and fragrant, as if freshly picked. Weiss had to admit, it was a beautiful thing to wake up to.

"Do you want me to stay?" Ruby asked.

Weiss nodded, giving Ruby a smile, which she returned, almost shining, even in the dark. "What's with all the flowers?"

"When people asked where you were, we told them you had been injured in a hunt." Blake replied. "Word travels quickly, and wellwishers started bringing you flowers."

"I added a few drops of my blood to the spray bottle, and they seem to love it!" Ruby cheered.

"Fascinating..." Weiss trailed off. "Blake, why am I still cold?"

Blake tapped the book before opening it, flicking through a few pages before coming to her destination. After scanning the page she tapped a line. "Vampires do not generate the body heat of a human. This manifests in newly sired vampires feeling a temperature dysmorphia. This usually passes within a few days, though some have reported this condition lasting upwards of a month."

"Ah, unfortunate." Weiss sighed. "What book is that?"

"We're still working on a title." Blake answered. "Current candidates are 'On Vampirism', 'The Vampire Almanac', 'The Vampire's Diary' and 'So You Want to Know About Vampires'."

"We?" Weiss asked.

"Glynda wrote it." Ruby explained. "It's almost all she's done since that night."

"We don't know any vampires who can mentor you, so Glynda broke out every book she had and started taking notes." Blake added. She handed the tome to Weiss, who ran her hands over the thick leather. Whatever anger she felt before seemed to diminish.

"She wrote all this in...how long was I out?" Weiss asked.

"About five days." Ruby replied.

"On top of the time dilation she cast in her office, she's probably been working on it for a little over a week." Blake noted. "She's been going basically non-stop. I have to remind her to eat and drink."

Weiss opened the book, taking in the foreword, seemingly one of the more recent writings, after the book had become more than just a series of notes for Weiss. It was addressed to any fledgling vampire, or curious scholar who might pick up a copy, expressing a hope that they use the knowledge within for noble purposes, to help rather than hinder, for not all vampires are evil, and not all need be treated with fear and scorn. Glynda always did have a way with words. Static as
they were, they gave Weiss hope.

"It seems I will need to study it thoroughly." Weiss noted.

"Would you like some time alone?" Blake offered.

"Hmm, I assume the others wish to see me?" Weiss asked.

Blake and Ruby exchanged a look. "Winter should be first." Blake suggested.

Weiss froze. Her sister had not previously entered her thoughts. Winter Schnee, former apprentice to High Templar Ironwood, the only thing stronger than her hatred of vampires was her hatred of her father. "Oh...fuck." Weiss groaned.

"Yeah...Winter doesn't like me very much...or any of us really." Ruby sighed.

"Weiss, you don't have to see anyone until you're ready." Blake advised. "This was a lot to take in."

"We're just happy you're alive and recovering." Ruby smiled.

Weiss managed to smile back, grateful for their consideration. Regardless, it needed to happen, sooner rather than later. "Is she here?"

"She comes to visit you everyday at noon." Blake replied.

"And currently it is?" Weiss asked.

"Almost midday." Ruby answered.

"Very well." Weiss nodded. "Then, in the meantime?"

"Pyrrha really wants to see you." Ruby declared.

"And Glynda...well...if you wish it." Blake added.

Weiss carefully maintained a blank expression. Rationality, she thought, she needed to be rational. "I'm ready to see Pyrrha then."
Ruby left the room and shortly there came a knock at the door. "Come in." Weiss called. The door slowly opened and she shielded her eyes until it closed again. Pyrrha stood before the door, hands clasped in front of her, seemingly unable to decide what to say or do. "Hi Pyrrha."

"H-hello Weiss." Pyrrha responded. "How are you feeling?"

"Cold, depressed, angry, but happy to be alive...sort of." Weiss replied. "Blake told me you were the one who figured out I was in danger. Thank you."

"I wish I would have realized sooner." Pyrrha sighed.

"There was no way you could have known." Weiss declared. "I should have been more careful. Looking back...it's so obvious..."

"You shouldn't blame yourself." Pyrrha advised. "I know a thing or two about that."

"I don't." Weiss noted. "I blame that monster. Have you been able to track her down?"

"No, I'm afraid not." Pyrrha shook her head. "The Huntsmen and Yang have been searching, doing everything the can to track her, but they've come up empty."

"It's an island, she can't have gotten far." Weiss said. "I can hear the wind and rain, there's no way they could get to the mainland in a storm like this."

"Right now, I care more about you than catching her." Pyrrha refocused the conversation. "Is there anything I can do to help you?"

"No, not really." Weiss replied. "Blake said you donated blood already. I'm just...so cold. Has anyone been covering my Huntress duties?"

"Yang has." Pyrrha answered. "She had a bit of a run-in with Winter, you know. We sent her to watch your house, take care of your commitments, that sort of thing. When Winter showed up...well, suffice to say they didn't get along. She says she cleaned up your place though, so when you're ready to go back, you've got that to look forward to. She brought your clothes over, Glynda and Ruby managed to get the blood out...mostly Ruby."

"I'll have to thank her." Weiss noted. "I take it Winter has taken over my duties now?"

"Yes, for the time being." Pyrrha confirmed. "Though once she departs, I will be taking over."

"You mean you're-" Weiss started.
"Yes, I've resumed my Huntress training, in addition to my magical studies." Pyrrha nodded. "Take as long as you need to recover."

"Thank you that's...I appreciate it." Weiss struggled. "Hopefully I'll be back on my feet soon."

"I don't doubt it, but that's not really what we're worried about." Pyrrha admitted. "This all must be a terrible shock...I can't imagine what you're going through, none of us can. There needs to be more to your recovery than just the physical aspect."

"With everyone's support I'm sure I'll be fine." Weiss declared, managing a smile for Pyrrha's benefit.

"I know, you're so strong." Pyrrha smiled back. "I just...I worry and...can I have a hug?"

"Of course." Weiss agreed. She turned a bit and leaned forward to allow Pyrrha to embrace her. Pyrrha was usually a strong hugger, but this embrace seemed weaker, perhaps because Pyrrha feared hurting Weiss who was still in a frail condition. Weiss rested her chin on Pyrrha's shoulder.

"We just want you to get better." Pyrrha sniffled.

Weiss barely heard her. Instead Pyrrha's heartbeat pounded in Weiss’ head. She could sense Pyrrha's pulse, so close to her neck. She found herself stricken by a desire to strike, to bite, to feed.

"No!" Weiss pushed Pyrrha back.

"Weiss, what did-" Pyrrha gasped.

"Sorry I...damnit." Tears formed in Weiss' eyes. "I could feel...I was..."

Pyrrha realized what was happening. "Weiss, it's okay, it's fine, really."

"No, it's not okay." Weiss sighed. "I need to read more." Weiss traced the cover of the book on her lap. "There must be a way to suppress..." The door opened and Weiss was blinded by the light. She shielded her eyes, but this time the door did not close. She forced herself to look, and as her eyes slowly adjusted, she was able to make out a tall figure, a familiar figure. "Sister."

"Weiss." Winter said. "It's good to see you're awake." She turned to the others. "Blake, Pyrrha, could you leave us?"

"Oh, of course." Pyrrha nodded. "Weiss um...get well soon. If you need anything, just ask." Pyrrha headed out and Blake followed her without a word.

"Weiss, how are you feeling?" Winter asked, remaining near the door.

"Cold." Weiss replied.

"I mean emotionally." Winter clarified.

"I think you can figure it out." Weiss groaned.

"Yes...yes I can." Winter sighed. "I'm...I'm sorry I wasn't here to protect you."

"It's not your fault." Weiss said.

"I know but...you're my responsibility." Winter countered.

"I'm old enough to look after myself." Weiss insisted. "At least I should be able to look after
myself."

"You're still young Weiss, you'll always be young to me." Winter declared.

"It seems so, vampires do not age after all." Weiss gave a tight smile, then sighed. "Could you close the door? The light hurts my eyes."

"Oh, yes of course, I apologize." Winter hastily closed the door.

Weiss was able to get a good look at her sister for the first time. She looked sickly, pale, with deep bags beneath her eyes. Even her hair was not in perfect order, a far cry from her usual, neat appearance. She stood in place, stiff and uncomfortable. "It's no problem, you didn't know. Pyrrha tells me you have taken charge of my duties."

"Yes, after I removed a rather rude demon from your home-" Winter started.

"Yang?" Weiss asked.

"Yes, Yang." Winter scowled.

"You didn't do anything to her, did you?" Weiss pressed.

"I was tempted." Winter grumbled.

"She has her uses." Weiss noted. "Have you met Ruby?"

"I have." Winter replied. "She visited, requesting to take some of your things. I sent her away. Her aura is...wrong. I cannot put my finger on it, but I do not approve of her presence."

"Ruby...is an enigma, but a well meaning one." Weiss suggested.

"Where did she come from?" Winter inquired.

"Pyrrha summoned her, by accident." Weiss answered.

"How?" Winter asked.

"A ritual went awry apparently." Weiss explained.

"That does not inspire confidence." Winter scoffed.

"She's a clueless little girl, and I've treated her poorly enough for the both of us," Weiss frowned. "Please treat her with kindness."

Winter opened her mouth to respond, but snapped it shut when Weiss fluffed her blankets, shivering and pulling them tighter around herself. "Very well...are you really so cold?"

"I'm f-freezing because I no longer generate much body heat." Weiss snarled, glaring a hole in the wall. "It should pass within a few days, but until then I'm resigned to being a bloody marshmallow." Winter tensed as Weiss paused, taking a very long, drawn out breath. "Gods this is just...I hardly need to breathe, Winter. If I still sang it would do wonder for my career, but right now it just keeps reminding me of what I am now and it's...jarring."

"And what will you career be now?" Winter asked.

"I will continue to hunt, after I recover." Weiss replied.
"You can no longer effectively hunt during the day." Winter warned.

"Pyrrha will handle the daylight hours." Weiss responded.

"And what of the people?" Winter pressed. "If they find out your condition-"

"I will cross that bridge when I get to it." Weiss cut her off.

"What if something happens, what if you're attacked, what if you lose control and...and…" Winter persisted.

"Then you will kill me." Weiss stared at Winter. "As you are no doubt prepared to do."

A sharp pang of guilt cut through Winter's chest. Weiss' solemn gaze led downward, to the hilt of Winter's sabre, grasped tightly by her gloved hand, to still the tremors that ran through her extremities. She did not even realize she was holding it, it was a reflex, something she always did around supernatural creatures. A wave of grief welled up inside her. "Weiss…" She whispered, closing her eyes.

Winter willed herself to move, untying the straps that held the sheathe to her belt. She held the weapon before her for a moment before tossing it aside. Winter had been a seasoned Templar before she fled the order. She had banished demons, expelled aspects, burned witches and hunted down werewolves and vampires like vermin. The silver-infused steel had tasted the blood and essence of many a creature. But Weiss? Her beloved sister?

"I could never harm you." Winter admitted, wearily. She slowly approached her sister, kneeling beside the bed and reaching out. Weiss' hands were cold, stone cold, like a corpse, yet they were still so soft, blood flowed through them, kept alive by whatever curse resided in her body. What remained of her sister, of Weiss Schnee, what fought onward in the face of this great adversity, Winter could never bear to kill. She would sooner die, and be reunited with their mother. "I'm so sorry Weiss." Winter choked, tears stinging her eyes. She bowed her head in shame. "I couldn't protect you, and I could never bring myself to kill you. I'm a failure of a sister...and a Templar."

"Winter...look at me, please." Weiss begged, ignoring the ache in her heart and the tremble of her lips as her sister obeyed. "I don't blame you for anything. You're my sister, and you're not perfect. Neither of us are, and we never will be. I love you."

"I love you too, little sister." Winter sniffed, managing a smile, which Weiss returned.

"If the worst comes, I'll have a plan, and that's if the worst comes." Weiss continued. "I refuse to lose myself to this curse." She smirked. "I still have commissions to complete."

"And all the little ones came out and climbed all over me…” Ruby vibrated with excitement, recounting her encounter with a family of rabbits while exploring the surrounding woods as Pyrrha gathered ingredients. "And the mama used my...boobs? Boobs! As pillows! It was so cute!" Ruby was snuggled into Weiss' side all the while. Over the covers of course, Weiss was not in the habit of inviting women into her bed...anymore. But Ruby was warm, and kind, her presence pleasant, her smile infectious.

It was a far cry from Weiss' attitude toward the summon just days prior. Perhaps it took a deathly experience to make her see the value of good company. Perhaps death softened her hard soul. Or what was left of it. "You must be related to a natural force of some kind, perhaps some kind of spriggan?" Weiss speculated.
Ruby hummed. "Pyrrha thought so too, but my blood is human, and my essence resonates with dark. Glynda says spriggans are beings of light, and have chlorophyll instead of blood. I'd be all green."

"Yes, I suppose green wouldn't be your color." Weiss smirked.

"Yang says I look hot in red, but she's the hot one, she's made of fire!" Ruby rambled. "I'm just a little warm, I'm not made of anything, just blood, and bones, and flesh." She lamented, oddly sad.

Weiss rolled her eyes and poked the girl in her side, eliciting a squeak. "You are more than flesh, bone and blood Ruby, and there is nothing wrong with being warm. Warmth is life, you only have one. Cherish it." Weiss trailed off, staring into Ruby's eyes. The silver seemed to glow in the dark room, they drew Weiss in, offering warmth and cold in equal measure. Then she blinked, and Weiss felt an odd sick feeling passing over her, a shiver running through her being.

"Weiss, are you okay?" Ruby asked, worried.

Weiss lay back on her pillow, sighing. "I don't know Ruby...just...be patient with me, please?"

"You know I will." Ruby grasped Weiss' hand in both her own, hugging it close. "You're my friend, I'll do anything for you."

Weiss did not respond, but for a firm squeeze of her hand. They merely lay there, enjoying the silence. A gentle knock on the door roused them. "Come in." Weiss called, and the door was opened, slowly and gently, to reveal Glynda, normally passive expression tense, a soft smile flickering at the edge of her lips. Weiss stared at the odd sight, until a dark blur materialized on the foot of her bed as Blake's cat form made its way towards her.

"Hey Blake!" Ruby chirped. "Hey Glynda!" She reached out to run a hand down Blake's voil-like fur.

Weiss did the same, smiling as Blake nuzzled her hand, and purred when her ears were scritched. "Hello Blake...Glynda, are you well?" Weiss asked, eyes trained on Blake, the light from the doorway still bothersome.

Glynda hastily stepped inside, shutting the door. "I am, thank you Weiss." She lied. Glynda was never the type to wear makeup, and the bags beneath her eyes spoke the truth. "And...yourself? How are you...adapting?"

"Slowly, but surely." Weiss looked over and tapped the tome on her bedside table. "I have you to thank for this...it has been a rather...interesting read."

"Yang believes it requires more pictures, and for once I do agree with her." Glynda noted.

"Hmm, a cross section of vampire fangs would be of interest." Weiss suggested. "An organic syringe is an inspired comparison, but I imagine the actual biology makes for a far more striking image."

"I have contacted several colleagues in search of more sources." Glynda added. "Hopefully I shall receive more research, scattered though it may be, within the month. I would appreciate assistance searching through it, when the time comes."

"I would appreciate the opportunity to learn more...Ruby." Weiss turned her attention.

"Yeah?" Ruby asked.
"May we have some privacy please?" Weiss requested. "Blake?" Blake froze, golden eyes glowing in the dark. "I'm not going to bite." Weiss whispered, smirking. Blake stared blankly at her, before rolling her eyes and padding over onto Ruby's chest and into her arms.

"Can I get you anything?" Ruby asked.

"No, Ruby, thank you." Weiss replied. "Tell Yang I said hello." Weiss cupped Ruby's cheek, squeezing it playfully before pushing her away.

"I will, Glynda?" Ruby asked, standing, Blake turning her gaze towards her mistress.

"No, thank you Ruby." Glynda answered. "Pyrrha will be back soon. She was just visiting Velvet."

"Ooh, she might bring back cookies!" Ruby squealed. "I'll save you one Weiss!" She rushed to the door, slipping through as hastily as possible, and closing it behind her.

Finally, Glynda and Weiss were alone. "I see you have grown closer to Ruby," Glynda quietly observed.

Weiss could not help the smile that came to her face. "Friends...we are friends." She stated. "It's strange. Before now I considered Blake a friend, and I considered Pyrrha a friend, but I was rarely friendly with them. I never...craved their presence. I enjoyed it at times, tolerated it otherwise, and I thought, this was normal. This is friendship. I was not impressed."

"You feel differently now?" Glynda inquired.

Weiss nodded. "Ruby is innocence Glynda, pure, untainted, not a slight upon her soul. I think once I realized that, and stopped searching for...something less, I allowed myself to feel real friendship for the first time. And I see it reflecting in the actions of others. Blake, Pyrrha, even Velvet, meddling aside..."

"I have Pyrrha keep an eye on her." Glynda noted.

"I know, and that should have been enough for me." Weiss said. "But as per usual, my upbringing had tainted my worldview. I should have trusted the others. I should have trusted you."

"Yet you do not name me among your friends." Glynda observed, for once a hint of emotion finding its way into her voice.

Weiss met Glynda's gaze. "No." She declared. Glynda looked crestfallen. "You're more than that. You took me in, provided me with the opportunity to realize my greater potential, opened my eyes to wonders I could scarcely have dreamed of, all the while giving me the space and patience I required. You gave me a new life Glynda...and now you have given me a second chance at that life." Weiss shut her eyes, feeling the sting of emotion behind them, swallowing the lump in her throat. She felt the bed dip down, and the warmth and jasmine scent of Glynda's perfume prevailed over the flowers.

"I'm proud of you Weiss." Glynda's voice was thick with unfettered emotion. Weiss opened her eyes as she felt Glynda's hand on her left. She tried to keep it still, she tried not to think about it, the IV feeding vital essence into her starving veins. "From the moment Winter brought you to me I knew you would accomplish great things. You would accomplish them on your own, but with the right guidance, you would be all the safer for it. Winter made the first step, drawing you from your father, and you made the second, accepting me as a mentor."

Glynda smiled warmly, if a little watery in the eyes. She reached up to the blood bag, two thirds
drained, the letter G marked on a scrap of tape. "I have had apprentices before you Weiss, before Pyrrha, but none who so reminded me of myself as you." Glynda continued. That got Weiss' attention. "You wanted to carve out your own path, free of the corruption of your lineage. And you wanted to do it via your own merits. I didn't need to mentor you. I needed to provide guidance when desired, and the resources required. The rest was up to you, your intelligence, and your drive to do good in the face of adversity.

"And so you flourished...and when Pyrrha told me that you were in danger...I was terrified, that such a brilliant light would be snuffed out, under my watch...and then I had to make that decision, to damn you to life, or concede you to death." Glynda took a shuddering breath. "I just want to know I did the right thing Weiss. Not right by me, right by you. Given the choice, is this what you would have wanted?"

"Glynda, I won't deny this was a huge shock." Weiss squeezed Glynda's hand, reaching over it to hold it in both her own. "I awoke, when I thought myself dead, only to find myself...somewhere between. I won't deny I was angry, I felt violated, in heart and soul both...it took some time for that feeling to cool. But I believe that given the choice, yes Glynda, I would have chosen this. I have expressed as much to the others, and I did not lie. I have far too much to accomplish in this world, and now it seems I will have many more years in which to do so. And I hope to spend many of them by your side." Weiss finished with a smile.

Glynda matched it. "You will outlive me for certain." She chuckled. "Perhaps that is fate's punishment."

"As if you won't conquer death before then." Weiss joked.

"Who's to say I haven't already?" Glynda smirked. "Perhaps I will simply choose to ascend unto the next world once I have accomplished all that I wish." Glynda flourished her hand dramatically, before she and Weiss descended into giggles.

"Then you would never leave us." Weiss chuckled. "Not until humanity stopped being morons and achieved world peace, as you put it so eloquently once."

"Yes, I suppose that is true." Glynda nodded. "It seems I must resign myself to being a glorified nanny for magical children...speaking of which, have you memorized the passage on vampiric sustenance?"

Suddenly serious, Weiss found herself tense once more. "Yes, it was...fascinating."

"We have collected donations from those aware of your condition, including Velvet and Port." Glynda noted.

"Port?" Weiss scoffed. "I'm surprised he didn't break in to put me down himself."

"You give the man too little credit." Glynda smiled. "One of his closest friends is a vampire. If you listened once in a while, you would know this."

"Let me guess, they met on the field of battle, bloodlust fueling their actions as they carved swaths toward each other, engaging in glorious combat even as their allies fell around them-" Weiss started.

"So you do listen?" Glynda interrupted.

"No, I have heard enough imitations over the years to know better." Weiss explained.
"Well then, glorious warrior Port was perfectly understanding, and donated blood himself gladly, alongside Velvet, Pyrrha, Winter and myself." Glynda said. "If you are feeling a sensation of magical euphoria, that would be my blood running through your veins." Glynda gestured to the blood bag. "Of course, this is the lesser method of ingestion. Drinking is far more healthy, as you body can properly absorb, digest and filter it. Not to mention it is far more efficient. But I'll understand if you are uncomfortable with doing so for the time being."

"Yes, the idea is...unnerving." Weiss admitted. "Perhaps another time."

"Very well." Glynda allowed.

"When can I go home?" Weiss asked.

"I would prefer you stay for another week, until your body has completed its transformation, and you can withstand exposure to sunlight without being blinded." Glynda advised. "We will also need to prepare your home, sealed shutters, curtains, removal or suppression of certain artifacts, silver objects, garlic, etcetera." She listed.

"Very well, another week it is." Weiss agreed. "I'm sure Ruby can keep me entertained once I've finished reading your book...why not call it How to Train Your Vampire?"

Glynda stared blankly at Weiss. "No."

Chapter End Notes

This is a Thanksgiving gift from Jws and I, we aren't continuing the story yet, the current season of Solstice takes priority, but it is next on our agenda, so look out for it after we finish up!
Chapter Summary

Life has never been, and never will be easy for the Schnee sisters...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

With a handwritten note from Weiss, Winter had reluctantly allowed Ruby entry into her home to gather a list of items. Winter still followed her around as she collected Weiss' journal, securely locked, several changes of clothes, all shades of white, grey and blue, except for her underwear which tended towards red, not that Winter appreciated Ruby going through those particular delicates. And lastly, Ruby retrieved her sword, Myrtenaster Weiss called it, a long slender silver blade with an oddly bulky hilt.

Winter took the time to explain that Weiss would no longer be able to handle the weapon barehanded, and that Ruby should not be able to either. Templar blades contained a steel core, coated in blessed silver. They were crafted with the sole purpose of vanquishing the supernatural, and generally burned any such being on contact. And yet Ruby was holding it with both hands. She seemed fine, much to Winter's shock and displeasure. Ruby took some gloves before fleeing the home. She really did not like being disliked.

Upon arriving home, Ruby threw a couple logs into the hearth. Yang was out hunting Grimm to blow off some steam, and would appreciate a roaring source to relax in. It had not taken long for everyone to become used to Yang's presence. Glynda and Pyrrha borrowed her if they needed something heated, or disposed of properly. Blake often curled up in front of the flames to rest, allowing Yang to gently pet her. Ruby asked the two why they got along so well without saying much. Blake had replied that the brightest lights cast the darkest shadows. They had laughed at length, causing Ruby to feel she had missed a hidden meaning behind the joke.

Heading toward Weiss' room, Ruby stopped by the fridge to fetch a fresh blood-pack, this one containing Winter's blood. In a morbid fashion, perhaps it would be of comfort to Weiss, that her sister would help sustain her today...yeah, probably not. Shifting the bag containing Weiss' belongings over her shoulder, Ruby softly knocked on the door. After a few moments there was still no response.

"Weiss?" Ruby called. "I got your things."

"Come in Ruby." Weiss' muffled voice spoke.

Ruby obeyed, quickly slipping in and closing the door behind her. "Winter said the silver on your sword will hurt, so I picked up some gloves as well." She set the bag down on the bed and opened it. "She said these were your favorite." Ruby pulled a pair of grey riding gloves from the bag, holding them up for Weiss to see. It was then that Ruby noticed her change of position, cross-legged, angled away, blankets pulled over her head.
"Thank you Ruby." Weiss said. "Was Winter kind to you?"

"Yeah, she just followed me around frowning." Ruby replied. "You know, like she was thinking bad things instead of saying them."

Weiss laughed softly at that. "Yes, that sounds like Winter." Her voice was shaky. "Seethe in silence, then vent on some unsuspecting Grimm. I believe she and Yang would get along if they set aside their differences and went on a hunt together."

Worried by Weiss' composure, or lack thereof, Ruby crawled onto the bed. "Weiss, are you okay?"

Weiss sighed. "I miss the sun Ruby, the light filling my room each morning, the warmth of its light upon my skin, reminding me with each passing day that life was worth living. If I could just see the sun once more, unimpeded by the everlasting clouds of Atlas…" Weiss turned to look at Ruby, who gasped at the sight. An angry red burn covered the left side of Weiss' face, her eye clouded over, though it seemed to be slowly fading. "How bad is it? I can't look in the mirror" She managed a watery laugh.

Ruby plastered on a reassuring smile. "Just looks like someone slapped you. I think it's clearing up...did you-"

"Try to get some sun?" Weiss interrupted. "Yes. It seems my transformation is not yet complete." She laughed, this time bitterly, her face contorting with emotion. "Transformation, it's like I'm a caterpillar, metamorphosing into a beautiful butterfly, with fangs, and an allergy to light, and a compulsion to feast upon human blood." Weiss choked, huddling into her blankets and sobbing.

Ruby threw herself forward, wrapping Weiss in the tightest hug she could muster. Weiss did not shake her off, instead nuzzling closer, burying her face in the fabric of her shirt. "You are beautiful Weiss."

"I'm a monster." Weiss whimpered.

"Yeah, so, monsters can be beautiful." Ruby defended. "Nora and Ren turn into big man wolves and even then they look beautiful."

Weiss choked a laugh. "I'll be sure to remember that when I look like a living corpse Ruby."

"Even then I'll think you're beautiful Weiss, because you are, you are all to me." Ruby insisted. "Existence is beautiful, every sight, every sound, every smell and sensation. It's awesome, life?" She pulled away to meet Weiss' teary gaze, streaks of murky red running down her cheeks. Weiss once again found herself frozen in silver. "Weiss, life isn't breathing, life isn't our soul, it's our story, and every day I see and experience new things, a new animal, a new flower, a new tale from my friends, and I've only seen a tiny little part of what this world has to offer. And you're part of that. You're part of my life and I'm part of yours. You died Weiss, but you haven't stopped living, not yet, and as long as you don't give up, that won't be for a very long time, and I'll stay by your side every step of the way if I have to." She buried herself in Weiss' chest this time.

Weiss blinked, that strange feeling filling her mind once more. But this time, it felt right. "Because you're my friend." Weiss whispered. She felt Ruby nod against her chest, along with a swell of warmth. She chose to latch onto that warmth, and wrapped her arms around it. "I'm not okay Ruby."

"But you will be, someday." Ruby murmured.

"Hmm...someday." Weiss sighed. "Perhaps when I can walk in the sun once more."
They stayed like that for a time, basking in the calm. Ruby's scent was a constant, it surprised and concerned Weiss that she did not feel some need to feed. Perhaps it was Ruby's nature as a summon. Blake and Yang were the same, not that she had seen Yang more than once, promising to hunt down the creature that harmed her, then running off to do so. But even so, Ruby's scent was...something.

"I have an idea." Ruby piped up, pulling away, a grin on her face. "I can't give you the sun, but maybe I can do second best." With that she hopped off the bed, barely stopping to avoid running straight through the door in her excitement. "I'll be back soon, I promise!" She yelled as she slipped out the door.

As the door thudded shut, Weiss was left a tad shellshocked. She laughed, shaking her head, reaching up with her sleeve to wipe her tears away. Her sleeve came away stained red. "Shoot."

Glynda arrived soon after Ruby had left, the latter having informed her of Weiss' injuries. She fussed over Weiss' singed facial features, making her feel like a little girl again, when Winter would worry over her every scrape and bruise. There was nothing for Glynda to do beyond admonish Weiss for her foolishness, as the wounds would soon heal themselves. The sun might weaken and burn vampires, but unless they were in a seriously weakened state, it rarely did permanent damage.

Weiss spent the next hour unpacking. Pyrrha had brought some of her clothes while she was still unconscious, but she did not know which Weiss preferred. Ruby's list included her favorite nightgown, thickened socks, tights - which Weiss was shocked Pyrrha had neglected - and her cloak, lovingly sewn by Velvet Scarlatina. Her journal's wards were unbroken, which either meant no one had tampered with it, or knew exactly what she used, and how to perfectly replicate them. She chose to believe that Winter had not pried.

Alongside a blank notebook, inkwell and her favorite fountain pen, was Myrtenaster. Her beloved rapier was wrapped in a black cloth. She could feel warmth radiating from it, and for the first time in her life, it felt dangerous, as if it would shock her should she touch it. According to Glynda's book, it could do much worse than that. Steel could scarcely inflict more than a papercut upon her person, but silver alone would render her flesh as mortal as any human's. She would scar like any other. The blessed nature of this blade would sicken her to boot.

Still, Weiss preferred to keep it by the side of her bed. Harmful as it may be, the ability to defend herself brought a peace she found had been lacking since her awakening. The riding gloves Ruby brought would protect her in any case. Happy with the neat state of her belongings, Weiss spent the rest of her wait reading more of Glynda's book. Blood in her tears was apparently normal, as vampire bodies needed far less water than humans. Inconvenient, but Weiss rarely if ever cried anyway, she had been taught better than that.

Striga and Vorvolaka were variations of the common vampire, rare natives of remote regions of Vacuo and Mistral respectively, and the most powerful vampires were the Nosferatu. Weiss already knew this, having familiarized herself with vampiric kind during her training, but then only so she could kill them more effectively. The chances of meeting a Nosferatu, let alone killing one, were extraordinarily slim. Regardless, they tended towards peaceful, or at least as peaceful as vampires could be.

Weiss was halfway through a paragraph on vampiric bloodlines when two loud knocks rung upon the door, and before she could answer, it opened, revealing a beaming Yang. "Heya' Weissy!" She chirped, barging in.
Ruby quickly followed, closing the door. "Yang, keep it down. Her hearing is still adjusting."

"It's quite alright Ruby." Weiss waved her off. "Loud noises no longer hurt. Hello Yang, how went your hunt?"

"I haven't found her yet." Yang lamented. "But I've been taking out a ton of Grimm. If nothing else I'm keeping the people safe."

"Thank you, the people take precedence after all." Weiss nodded. "Ruby, what was your idea? You neglected to inform me."

Ruby gestured toward… "Yang! Daughter of the Dragon God of Fire."

"Otherwise known as the Great Sun Dragon." Yang added.

"She isn't literally the sun, but she's related to it!" Ruby cheered.

"Someone told me we had a Weissicle on our hands." Yang teased.

"Yang!" Ruby whined, looking from her to Weiss. "I didn't call you that Weiss."

Weiss merely chuckled. "It's okay Ruby...it's not entirely inaccurate." She rolled her eyes. "So what's the plan exactly?" Yang answered that by shrugging off her clothes, entirely. It was as if they were flames melting from her form, as in a way they were. "Oh gods." Weiss covered her eyes, but not before getting a face-full of Yang's considerable, perfectly sculpted assets.

"Yang, humans don't like nudity." Ruby admonished.

"I-it's not that we don't like it, it's that it's...improper." Weiss stammered. She could not recall if vampires could blush, but if they could, she surely was right now.

"The best way to conduct heat is skin to skin contact!" Yang explained. "Trust me, I've done it before." She explained bouncing, in multiple places, over to Weiss' bedside and lifting the covers. "Come on, move a tad, don't be shy, I won't bite...dunno' about you, but I'd advise against it, because, you know, burning." Yang laughed. Weiss groaned, but moved forward enough for Yang to slip behind her, an arm wrapped around her midsection, and she suddenly found herself surrounded by the warmest embrace she had experienced in her life, and it was only getting warmer. "Just tell me when it's warm enough."

Weiss felt herself shudder, the increasing warmth was an ecstasy she had sorely missed. She found herself melting into the embrace, sliding her arms beneath Yang's until she got the hint and took hold of Weiss' hands in her own. "Perfect." Weiss borderlined moaned, eyes sliding shut.

"Why thank you Weissy, I am pretty awesome." Yang chuckled behind her.

"You're truly a goddess Yang." Weiss complimented. "Thank you Ruby, I never would have thought of this."

"You're welcome!" Ruby cheered. "Is there anything else I can get you?"

Weiss thought for a moment. She felt tired, like she had just had a glass of warm milk before bed. Perhaps it was time for an early rest. "Come lay with us, until I fall asleep." She finally requested, much to Ruby's delight.

"Of course!" Ruby chirped, scrambling onto the bed until her head rested on Weiss' stomach.
Weiss shifted her hand to run through Ruby's hair, impossibly soft for how messy it looked. It only made her smile again. "Thank you both for your kindness...and friendship." She murmured as her eyes slid shut.

"Anytime Weisscream." Yang teased.

Weiss chuckled, just before she fell asleep.

Winter stood at attention on the edge of the clearing. It was not too far from town, nor too close. She wanted to avoid alarming the townspeople with the sudden arrival of an Atlesian Bullhead. Though the outside world was familiar with Atlas magitech, few had actually witnessed it in action, outside of select pieces of civilian technology, refrigerators, radios, televisions and the like, even washing machines in recent years. Still the airship about to land was far beyond what most non-Atlesians would ever lay their eyes upon. It was the size of an ocean-going warship, painted a gleaming white, and yet from it distance it seemed to hover with hardly a sound, as if light as a feather. Of course close up it was quite a lot louder.

Patch was particularly unlikely to have seen such a craft. The insular nature of Atlas meant external influence was minimal. The farther one traveled from the capital, the more primitive the world became. Patch was an odd assortment of cultures and technological periods, a haven for many seeking solace from the harsh realities of their homelands. There was good reason Templar presence here was minimal, why Glynda and Winter made it their home. It offered no strategic value, few natural resources, and required a boat or airship to reach.

Or teleportation magic, but that was expensive to craft and maintain, and only a few very powerful magicians could use it without technological aid. Glynda was one, and even she rarely used the skill. Winter was still attempting to learn. She had made it from one side of her room to the other recently. Granted she landed flat on her back. And vomited right after. Still, progress was progress, and Winter had time to burn.

A dull roar became evident, growing louder, and so Winter began walking into the clearing. The gleaming aircraft came into view, growing larger and larger by the second. Its gleaming white form was majestic even in its bulk. Winter braced herself against the downdraft as it came in to land, landing gear extended. Its sheer size took up more than half of the clearing, its wings nearly clipping the trees surrounding it. With an earth shaking thud, it finally made landfall, and the wind and sound began to fade as its engines powered down.

Approaching the landing ramp, Winter checked her appearance, brushing the hair from her face and ensuring her uniform was relatively straightened. The sky was threatening rain, but fortunately it had not yet come. All in all, she was presentable, but not perfect. She could never hope to be perfect, it was foolish, yet she tried. The ramp reached its full extension with a clunk, and with a whirl it began to descend, reaching the ground not ten meters from her person. With a yell, two rows of five soldiers jogged down the ramp, clad in the black leather and white plating of the Atlesian Armed Forces, and the red stake of the Templar order emblazoned on their shoulders.

The soldiers froze at the bottom of the ramp, standing at attention. Winter imitated them, and her gaze was drawn up to the ship, where a tall figure had begun the journey downward. "Former Specialist Schnee." The man greeted as he reached the bottom.

"At ease Schnee, you are no longer under my command." Ironwood noted. Winter allowed her
pose to relax, arms folding behind her back. It helped hide her shaking, though Ironwood immediately turned back to face his troops. "Secure the perimeter, start constructing a camp." He instructed before turning to speak over his shoulder. "Come with me, there is someone you need to meet." The soldiers who had descended the ramp fanned out. A part of Winter wished to join them, following simple orders seemed so menial, degrading even, but with all the free time in the world to do what she wished, there were some days she wanted to just give up that freedom for a hard day's operation. Even the odd hunt did not match up to some of her adventures in the Order. After all, one of them was how she met Glynda, and by extension, Blake.

Following Ironwood into the airship, Winter witnessed more familiar actions, technicians and engineers hauling cargo, soldiers sorting equipment or readying weapons. She swore the scent of boot polish hung in the air, or perhaps it was nostalgia clouding her senses. Vile, chemical nostalgia. "Reminiscing?" Ironwood piped up.

Winter noticed she had slowed, and hurried to catch up with her former mentor. "I apologize General. This environment does inspire certain...fond memories."

"Fond?" Ironwood challenged. "I recall a certain young recruit destroying a combat droid out of pent up frustration."

"It looked at me funny." Winter countered.

"And that is what made you such a fine Templar." Ironwood continued. "Once your temper was properly tamed, you honed it into a weapon of divine justice, and used it to dismantle evil with the precision of a scalpel."

"Thank you...sir." Winter's face burned at the compliment, and she cleared her throat. "I appreciate your praise."

"I appreciate you notifying me of this situation." Ironwood came to a halt before a door, opening it and stepping aside to beckon Winter inside. She found herself in a seemingly unoccupied private quarter, the sort meant for a civilian official or otherwise important guest on long journeys. "Winter." Ironwood's voice softly called. Winter felt her heart clench. "How are you faring, truly?"

Ironwood's demeanor changed, his stern, militaristic voice softening, and for the first time since she had left the Order, Winter found herself transported back in time, to when she was an angry, scared youth, trying desperately to free herself from her father's smothering influence, his lofty expectations and disregard for her individuality, to when Ironwood accepted her into his sect, in spite of blustering and threats from the High Templar, in spite of the objections of her fellow, male recruits, and personally trained her to become one of the greatest warriors in the Templar Order.

"I almost lost her James." Winter whispered, hands clenching her wrists as she took a shuddering breath. "I almost lost my sister, to the very thing that took mother from us, the very thing I swore to destroy in all forms and...I fear I may have regardless." She felt Ironwood's hand on her back, and she very nearly crumpled, turning to stare up into his eyes. "She turned her James. Glynda turned my sister rather than let her die."

"By the gods..." Ironwood murmured in shock. "This is rash, even for Glynda."

"I thought that perhaps she had simply been maimed during a hunt gone wrong, that she may be scarred or down a limb. I was terrified, but I knew she could pull through. We could defeat simple injury, but this? Glynda condemned her soul to the abyss either way, and her excuse was that she wanted to grant her a choice? What kind of choice is that? To live a half life as a p-parasite, or d-die by her own hand and not even be granted the honor of ascending to the heavens." She failed to
swallow a sob, turning away to wipe her eyes, and approached the bed, sitting down to pull in deep
breaths, attempting to regain her composure. She felt the mattress dip down beside her.

"Winter, don't bottle this up, let it out." Ironwood advised, wrapping his arms around her shoulder.

Winter hiccupped. "When I spoke with her, she seemed so...so strong James. She was angry, yes,
but unbroken. She looked me in the eye and said she would continue her work, and should she lose
herself, she trusted me to...to..." Winter could say no more, huddling into Ironwood's side to softly
sob. She had shed more than her fair share of tears already. It was exhausting. She had barely been
able to sleep, even with Weiss' awakening she found herself staying awake at night, staring at the
ceiling, anguish strangling her heart. There was nothing she could have done, and there was
nothing she could do. But this, turn to the one person in this world she trusted beyond Weiss. The
only person she loved beyond Weiss.

"I understand Winter, I truly do." Ironwood declared.

And he did, Winter trusted in that. Ironwood did not offer false sympathy. And even if he did,
Winter knew he understood her in this. Putting down comrades wounded in the line of duty was
something they had all prepared for, and unfortunately, many experienced. "I wouldn't be able to
survive James. Without Weiss I...I'd have nothing, just a cave in the mountains, filled with objects
of no true value, and a grave to lay flowers upon. I don't have anything else to live for."

"That's not true Winter, you have y-" Ironwood started.

"My what James?" Winter growled. "My work? Meaningless. I left the Order to set an example, to
grow stronger, to save Weiss from father, to give her a life worth living. What good is all that
without her? She is my soul James." Winter moved. Suddenly Ironwood found himself straddled
by a seething, crying Winter, fists clenching his lapels, shaking him with every word. "And my
heart seems fit only to be spurned."

At this Ironwood frowned, guilt shading his expression. "You know why it cannot happen Winter."

"It doesn't matter anymore." Winter insisted. "I am no longer a part of the Order. I no longer have
duties. I no longer swear by the code." Her grip softened, she leaned in to rest her forehead against
Ironwood's. "I can be yours, and you can be mine...just give us but one chance." She whispered,
eyes gazing lovingly into her former mentor's. Until he closed them, and turned away.

"No Winter, we can't." Ironwood murmured, regretfully.

And once again Winter felt the familiar pain in her heart, and the cold burn of shame descended
upon her. Slowly, she returned to her position beside the general, and wiped her eyes, downcast. "I
apologize."

"I know." Ironwood said.

"I-" Winter started.

"I know, Winter." Ironwood once again lay his hand upon her shoulder, and she turned to see a
reassuring smile. "Grief clouds judgement. I do not blame you. Thank you for venting your
feelings."

Winter could not help but laugh at that. Ironwood's smile always seemed awkward and forced,
regardless of how genuine it was, it just seemed so out of place on his stern face. "I have a lot of
feelings to vent."
"It may or may not please you to know, the person I wished you to meet is very good at listening to people." Ironwood observed.

"It does not." Winter responded.

"Unfortunate." Ironwood sighed, looking past Winter, to the lavatory door. "Penny, you can come out now." Much to Winter's shock and embarrassment, the door slid open, revealing an automaton, wearing clothing, with a painted doll-like face, and a...rather high quality wig. Winter groaned, hiding her flushed face in her hands.

"I apologize for eavesdropping General Ironwood and Specialist Schnee." The robot said. "I merely wished to provide you privacy."

"It's okay Penny." Ironwood soothed. "This is your room after all. Were you sleeping?"

"For a time, yes." Penny nodded. "This lavatory is very similar in size and shape to my stasis pod."

"Penny?" Winter asked, exasperated.

"Yes Specialist Schnee?" Penny replied.

"Why are...please do not repeat anything you have heard here to anyone else, ever." Winter requested.

"Acknowledged Specialist Schnee." Penny agreed.

"It's just Winter now Penny." She explained before turning to Ironwood. "Did you give her my file?"

"Penny was curious." Ironwood confirmed.

"I would like to ask that you not take out your frustrations upon my chassis." Penny requested. "Unlike my robotic brethren, there is only one of me, and father says I am irreplaceable."

Winter leveled a blank look at Penny, then at Ironwood. "I shall attempt to resist."

Chapter End Notes

Welcome back to Thicker Than Water, this time with a 100% guarantee we probably maybe won't stop writing it after eight more chapters. Maybe like twelve or sixteen.
Reflection
Chapter by RealTerminal

Chapter Summary

Weiss finds comfort in the arms of another...

Weiss wandered the abyss alone, naught but a spec of gleaming light in the distance to guide her path, frigid winds brushing past the exposed skin of her face, like an endless torrent of icy water. But still she pressed on, gloved hands raised to deflect the onslaught. The light held sanctuary, beckoning her forward even as her skin turned numb. The ground beneath her feet turned to ice, the ice collected snow, sparkling gently beneath invisible moonlight, and the light ahead came into focus.

A mirror, tall and ornate, stood before a tree. Weiss...saw her reflection approach, her reflection...but...she could see herself, her red cheeks and perfect teeth, normal teeth, no fangs in sight. It was beautiful.

"Hello my sweet." Cindy's voice whispered in her ear, and she found herself frozen, ice cold limbs sliding across her skin, her clothing drifting away like snow upon the wind, and Cindy's smirking visage appeared over her shoulder. "You are beautiful, so perfect, so warm...oh...my mistake!"
With a snarl, Cindy buried her fangs once more into Weiss' neck, that ice cold agony flowing through her body, but this time, she screamed and struggled and shook, sobbing and begging to be freed. All the while Cindy continued to feed on her lifeblood, frigid hands once more stroking her most delicate areas with loving precision. Her reflection changed, her skin lost its luster, her eyes grew sullen, her bones jutting as she was bled dry.

"Please...not again...help me." Weiss pled, trying to meet Cindy's gaze in the mirror. But the vampire was too far gone, so much so she was moaning...humming...a melody? A familiar one, one she had not heard since...she was a young girl...cradled in her mother's arms. "Mama?" Weiss croaked. But when Cindy's eyes snapped open they were lilac, glowing, warm, the warmest sight Weiss had ever seen, burning, Cindy's skin turning black and flaking away as embers, her hair glowing gold, her mouth no longer feasting but planting gentle kisses along her throat, perfect lips burning red marks as they went. "Yang?"

"I'm here Weiss." Yang soothed.

"Is she gone?" Weiss whimpered.

"She is." Yang confirmed.

"How are you here?" Weiss asked.

"You let me in." Yang replied.

"In?" Weiss pressed.

"You asked for my help." Yang answered.
"But...this is...this is a dream." Weiss stammered.

"Hmm...are dreams any less real because they're in your head?" Yang countered.

"I...ah Yang!" Weiss yelled in alarm. The world became bright, brighter than she had ever experienced. Her skin turned red, bubbling and blistering, blackening. The flesh on her fingers turned to dust before her very eyes, and as the world faded to black, she screamed herself awake, sobbing, phantom pains running through every inch of her body. But two familiar arms remained wrapped around her form, the soothing melody humming in her ear, gently driving away the pain and fear. "Yang." Weiss whispered hoarsely.

"I'm here Weiss." Yang responded.

"It hurt." Weiss whimpered.

"I know Weiss." Yang nodded.

"I saw it...I saw it happen again, she..." Weiss sobbed, her entire body shaking. "S-she took me...she took everything, m-my soul, my heart, my b-body." She shuddered barely able to breathe. "I loved her, s-she was my first and only love and she killed me Yang."

"And we will find her Weiss." Yang promised. "We will find her and drag her into the sun, and starve her until her skin boils and melts from her bones, I swear this to you."

"Killing her won't bring back what she stole from me." Weiss sighed.

"And nothing will, but you're strong Weiss, so strong." Yang tightened the embrace, her heat rising. "You can heal from this, and move on, embrace this new life, that will be the biggest fuck you to that bitch. You can be better than her. You can set an example for all of your kind, and Ruby and Pyrrha and Blake and Glynda and your sister, even if she's uptight, they'll all be by your side to help that happen."

"And you." Weiss added.

"And me, duh, though more at your back at the moment, not that I mind, you're comfy." Yang admired. "The perfect little spoon."

Weiss laughed at that. "You can't stay by my back forever Yang. You have to recharge on occasion."

"And I'll be right back as soon as possible, I promise." Yang whispered.

Weiss nodded, taking several deep, shaky breaths clutching at Yang like a lifeline. "It's stupid. I've barely felt real pain since I first awoke, but the one thing that keeps aching is my heart...I thought I'd found it Yang, I thought I'd found that...that happiness so many people find in each other. I thought I'd found my equal, I thought I'd found my companion, my soulmate...but I was wrong...and it hurts, a cold ache deep in my chest, throbbing, on the occasion that my heart decides to beat...and I'm reminded of what love made me."

"Love is a screwy thing Weiss." Yang observed. "My dad loved my mom, my mom loved my dad, but she doesn't love me, even though I was born of that love...it made me feel incomplete, like half of me wasn't meant to be. No one else seemed to think it was that special. Some of our kind just don't care for their creations. I like to think that if I ever make a child, it'll be with someone who will give them the love they deserve."
"I won't ever have children...the cost is too high...just another thing Cinder took from me." Weiss lamented.

"There is more than one way to skin a goat Weiss." Yang suggested.

"Hah, yeah, Weiss Schnee, vampire mom." Weiss scoffed. "Hey Weiss, raising a snack?"

"I think you'd do great." Yang encouraged. "Hey, how about we make a deal?"

Weiss huffed, shifting to the side, her hand lay upon one of Yang's breasts accidentally, but she merely looked up at the blonde aspect with interested eyes. "What kind of deal?"

"Humans make marriage pacts." Yang noted. "I always found them a bit silly. If you wanna' marry someone, you marry someone. Why don't we make a reproduction pact?"

"A repro...alright, how would that work exactly?" Weiss inquired.

"We don't need compatible bits and bobs to make babies Weiss." Yang explained. "I have a soul, and you have a soul, no matter how wounded it may be."

"Oh...I wasn't aware that was how it worked." Weiss admitted.

"Well hey, you learn something new everyday." Yang beamed.

Weiss found herself laughing. "Alright Yang." She sighed, shaking her head. "What kind of pact?"

"Someday, might be next week, might be next month, might be fifty years from now, you might want to have a baby." Yang replied. "If that day comes, I'll lend you my soul."

"That's an awfully large offer Yang, to make someone you've barely known for a fortnight, and met less times than you have fingers." Weiss warned.

"Technically I can have as many fingers as I like." Yang smirked.

"Yang." Weiss groaned, angling her face down to hide her smile. She noticed her hand's position and made to remove it, but Yang held it in place. It was just as warm as the rest of her, if not moreso.

"Weiss...I will live for hundreds of thousands of your human years, I'll meet many humans, many vampires, werewolves and all manner of creatures, and just as many aspects." Yang said. "I will have children with some of them...and I will love every one of them, until the day my spirit dies. At least I know if I have one with you, I can count on you loving them too."

Weiss felt her eyes sting, and it occurred to her she must be covered in bloody tears. Sure enough when she looked down her nightgown had large red tear stains around the collar. She sighed, and slowly pushed herself up to straddle Yang. "I assume you saw everything when you brought me home." She mumbled, grasping the hem of the gown and pulling it over her head. She shivered at the frigid air of the room on her skin, quickly using the gown to wipe her cheeks and eyes, and tossing it to the side.

"You're beautiful Weiss." Yang admired.

Weiss laughed. "I'll take your word for it...you're a literal goddess after all."

Yang beamed, resting her hands on Weiss' hips. "That's right, and my word is law where I come from."
"Hmm, maybe you could take me one day." Weiss suggested.

"That would be a *bit* of a bad idea." Yang warned.

"Maybe." Weiss chuckled, laying back down on Yang's warm chest, the feeling of her skin on her own was heavenly. "Maybe it'd be worth seeing before I die."

"Ask me a hundred years from now...I don't want to kill my new friend just yet." Yang laughed.

"Friend?" Weiss challenged. "After the reproduction pact and sleeping together nude...we are strange friends Yang."

"You humans love your labels Weiss." Yang shrugged. "I prefer to exist, and go along with whatever life throws at me."

"Luck huh...are you lucky Yang?" Weiss joked.

"You tell me Weiss." Yang smirked.

Weiss felt her smile falter, laying still as emotions swirled around her head. "I'll...I'll get back to you on that." She finally murmured, feeling Yang plant a kiss on her hair.

"Take your time Weiss." Yang advised. "We have forever."

Ironwood and Winter walked up the hill toward Glynda's house, Penny following close behind. Their trip from the airship, through the town and to the house had been made in awkward silence. Adding to the unease, the townspeople were clearly skittish around a Templar general and his automaton, staying well clear and speaking in hushed tones. One child had followed them for a time, clearly curious about Penny, but had fled when she turned to address him. Their fear was hardly surprising. Patch rarely saw Templars of any rank, and never Atlesian robots.

A sudden crash interrupted the silence of the walk. Ironwood and Winter turned toward the sound to find Penny lying face-down in the grass. "Penny, are you alright?" Ironwood asked.

"Yessir General Ironwood!" Penny replied. "But it seems my systems are resetting."

"Has this ever happened before?" Winter asked.

"No, this is-" Ironwood started. A sharp whooshing sound drew his and Winter's attention back toward the house. Glynda and Blake had teleported to the spot, now placing themselves in the group's path.

"General Ironwood." Glynda greeted flatly.

"Master Witch Glynda." Ironwood extended his hand but it was ignored. He sighed and returned it to his side. "I assume one of your wards is responsible for my android's current distress. Hmm...my shield prevented similar interference..."

"I neglected to activate my shield General Ironwood sir!" Penny called.

"What brings you and your death squads to my village?" Glynda hissed.

"I invited him." Winter answered.

"And why would you do that?" Glynda pressed.
"Because he and his men hunt beasts like the one that attacked my sister." Winter replied. "And he's more of a father to Weiss than Jacques ever was. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to go see her."

"Go ahead." Glynda stepped aside, allowing Winter to pass. Ironwood attempted to follow but found his path blocked by Blake. "State your intentions."

"Right now, I intend to see Weiss, to do what I can to support her." Ironwood took a step back.

"And after that?" Glynda inquired.

"My soldiers and I will hunt the rogue vampire that attacked Weiss." Ironwood explained. "I will position troops at the port to prevent her escape from the island, and send squads into the wilderness to locate her lair. As the hunters sent by Ozpin no doubt informed you, she is extremely dangerous. I cannot risk her slipping away to kill again."

"I don't want your men causing trouble." Glynda growled. "And I don't want them making the people nervous."

"They will maintain a low profile." Ironwood promised. "I understand the port has been damaged by the recent storm. They will assist in the repair efforts. As far as anyone will know, we're just a humanitarian assistance mission."

"Very well." Glynda allowed. "But as soon as the vampire is apprehended, you and your men will leave."

"Now, may I see Weiss?" Ironwood requested.

"That depends." Glynda resisted. "Do you come as a Templar or a private individual?"

"What's wrong with being a Templar?" Ironwood huffed.

"Oh, I don't know, all the killing non-humans." Blake finally spoke.

"Templars do not indiscriminately kill anything that's not human." Ironwood countered. "We hunt murderers and bring them to justice."

"So the Forever Fall Coven were all murderers then?" Glynda challenged.

"It's not that simple." Ironwood sighed. "You know that. They weren't all killers, but they were protecting killers. If they'd just given them up...I didn't have a choice."

"Neither did Weiss." Glynda snapped.

Ironwood frowned. "I know. I will not do her any harm, nor will I harm anyone under your protection. You have my word, as a Templar, and a man. Now please, may I speak with Weiss?"

"Fine." Glynda relented. "Blake, show him to her."

"What about the robot?" Blake asked.

Ironwood turned around, finding Penny still face down where she had fallen. "Penny, are your systems online yet?"

"No sir General Ironwood!" Penny replied. "It seems the ward is interfering with the reboot process."
Glynda rolled her eyes and snapped her fingers. "How about now?"

"Why...yes Master Witch Glynda!" Penny cheered. "It will take some time before motor function is restored to a degree sufficient to allow for locomotion."

"I can't leave her out here." Ironwood noted.

Glynda sighed. "I'll teleport her to the house."

Winter soon arrived at the house, letting herself in just in time to see Glynda and Penny materialize in the lounge, Penny held in the air by a levitation spell. With a few snappy hand gestures, Glynda flipped Penny around, and set her down on the couch in a sitting position. Winter found the sight amusing and a bit encouraging. If Glynda was taking Penny into her home, if only for a short time, she must have come to some understanding with General Ironwood.

Winter did not linger to eavesdrop on Glynda's conversation with the android, instead jogging up the stairs. She hardly slowed before reaching the door to Weiss' room. A smile on her face, Winter slipped inside, quickly closing the door behind her so as not to cause Weiss any unnecessary discomfort. The smile quickly disappeared. The scene before her made her blood boil. Instead of being tightly cocooned in blankets, Weiss only had a single one draped over her, and it was low enough to reveal her bare back. Her nightgown was crumpled on the floor at the foot of the bed, so Winter could guess that Weiss was nude. She was snuggled against the fire summon Yang's chest.

"What in the name of...get away from her demon!" Winter growled.

Yang propped herself up on an arm, revealing that she too was nude, and pressed a finger to her lips to shush Winter. Weiss was sleeping soundly for the first time in days, and the last thing Yang wanted was for that rare slumber to be interrupted. "Quiet." Yang whispered.

"Up, now." Winter demanded. She drew her silver saber, pointing the tip at Yang's face, Yang sighed. "Fine." Rather than further upsetting the bed by moving in physical form, she transformed, her now ethereal body vacating the bed and solidifying beside it, still nude.

"Clothes." Winter instructed, now lowering her weapon.

Yang rolled her eyes and flames erupted around her, dying down to reveal newly formed clothing. "Happy?"

"Wha...what's going on?" Weiss asked groggily. She looked up at Winter, then at the sword. "Winter...what are you doing?"

"What are you doing in bed with this demon?" Winter snapped.

It took a moment for Weiss to grasp the situation. "Oh for the love of…" Weiss grumbled. "I wasn't having sex if that's what you're asking. She was just keeping me warm." Winter hesitated, still eyeing Yang, but sheathed her sword.

"She's not lying." Yang insisted. "She's been cold, so I was warming her up. Skin-to-skin contact happens to be the most efficient method."

"I don't like you." Winter hissed.

"Really, I never would have guessed." Yang sneered. "You made that pretty clear the last time we
met. Maybe if you got the stick out of your ass-

"Yang, Winter, behave." Weiss cut in. "Winter, Yang's my friend, she was helping me out. Yang, Winter is just being protective, like a big sister should. And she can't help that the Templars trained her to mistrust summons. Now apologize, both of you."

"No." Winter refused.

"Winter." Weiss insisted.

"Oh fine...Yang, I'm sorry for pointing my weapon at you." Winter relented.

"And I'm sorry for saying you have a stick up your ass." Yang responded. "Even if it's true."

"Yang." Weiss admonished. Yang just shrugged. Weiss sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Winter, what brings you here today?"

"I've brought General Ironwood." Winter replied. "He'd like to speak with you."

"Oh...alright." Weiss nodded. "I'll get dressed...and make myself presentable."

"Let me guess, he's a Templar general." Yang suggested.

"He is indeed." Weiss confirmed.

"Wonderful." Yang grumbled.

"I'll be going." Winter noted. "We have another guest, and I must show her due courtesy. I love you sister."

"I love you too." Weiss declared. Winter managed a smile before she slipped out of the room.

"Just what we need, another trigger-happy-" Yang started.

"Give General Ironwood a chance Yang." Weiss requested. "He's been very good to my sister and I."

"That was before you were turned." Yang warned. "Who's to say he'll be supportive now that you're not human?"

"He's a good man." Weiss insisted.

"He's a Templar." Yang countered. "I won't let him harm you."

"He won't." Weiss threw off the covers and stood to begin dressing.

Yang handed Weiss her underwear. "Well I'm taking his weapon anyway."

"If that'll make you feel better." Weiss rolled her eyes. "Just be nice."

Yang smirked. "Nope."
Guided down the hall by the dark summon, Ironwood could not help but find the situation surreal. Here he was in the presence of aspects and witches, being granted access to a vampire, all with no intention of conflict. In all his years as a Templar, he had not encountered a situation quite like it. Of course he had been in the presence of non-hostile creatures in the past, but they were isolated, both in occurrence and variety, a few vampires here, a witch and her summon there, but never all in one place. And previously he had always been prepared to kill.

Ironwood remembered reading Winter’s report on Blake. It had been unfavorable, she was a powerful being of the dark who had brushed Winter aside with a casual flick of the wrist, yet Glynda had set her free, an extraordinary risky decision. Fortunately it was one that had paid off. Now here she was, a seemingly obedient servant to the Master Witch, sauntering her way down the hall in front of him, exuding calm. It was at odds with his experiences, and he was not sure how to feel about that.

Coming to a door toward the end, Blake halted, turning to fix Ironwood with a blank stare as she lazily knocked on the door. "Behave." She ordered, narrowing her gaze before slipping past him. A part of him felt irritated that he was being treated as such by a mere summon. The rest of him was oddly shaken by the threat in her tone. Winter was not a weak individual, she was a seasoned operative during that mission with Glynda, and Ironwood considered her close to an equal. To have been casually brushed aside…

The door opened, and Ironwood found himself face-to-face with yet another summon, this one less subtle in its distaste, glaring at him with glowing lilac eyes. "Hand over the piece cowboy." Yang demanded, holding out a cloth-covered hand.

Ironwood frowned, blowing air out his nose. "I am not here to harm her."

"Don't care, hand it over or fly home chrome dome." Yang growled.

"Yang." Weiss admonished from inside the room.

The summon refused to budge. Grinding his teeth, Ironwood reached inside his coat, grasping the handle of his handcannon. Yang flinched at the sudden movement, her hair glowing in the darkness. He slowly, carefully pulled the weapon free, by the frame not the grip, and placed it in Yang’s waiting hand. "Good." Yang bit, turning away for a moment, then nodding, retreating from the door.

Pushing the door open, Ironwood entered. The room was pitch black but for the light infiltrating from the hallway and Yang’s gently glowing form. Said form was hunched over slightly at the foot of the bed, softly whispering, presumably to Weiss. "I'll be fine Yang, I'm not in danger." Weiss insisted.

"I don't trust his kind Weiss." Yang responded.

"I am his kind Yang." Weiss noted.

"No...you're not." With that Yang pulled her scarf free, wrapping it about Weiss' neck, the orange 'fabric' fading to white. "Stay warm Weiss. Call me if you need me." With a stroke of her hair, Yang turned, giving Ironwood one last glare before leaving, the door softly closing behind her.
Now visible in the soft glow of the scarf, Weiss sat upon the bed, dressed neatly in a silk gown. She stroked the fabric around her neck, and fond smile on her face. "You keep strange company Weiss." Ironwood commented.

Weiss met his gaze with a tense chuckle. "Life has been strange as of late." She jested.

"Still, it is good to see you adjusting so well to your condition." Ironwood encouraged. "Many cannot bear to live with the curse."

"There's no sense giving in, not when so much can still be accomplished." Weiss suggested.

"Admirable, if risky." Ironwood nodded. "But life is not without its risks, undeath too I suppose."

"Hmm...Winter said you had information." Weiss changed the subject.

"I do." Ironwood dug back into his jacket pocket, pulling forth a folder, handing it over and taking a seat on the chest behind him.

Weiss stared down at the name printed on the white cardboard, opening the folder to find a familiar image. "Cinder Fall." Weiss murmured. "She called herself 'Cindy.'"

"Hmm, a lazy alias but I'll add it to the list." Ironwood thought aloud. "She's been getting sloppy. Miss Fall registered with the authorities in Mistral before she went rogue."

"Rogue...is that what they call it now?" Weiss sighed.

"Generally vampires who register are law abiding." Ironwood continued. "To be perfectly honest, Miss Fall's actions are rather out of character, not to mention..."

Weiss skimmed through the file. It was only one page, little more than a questionnaire sheet. Cinder Fall, thirty years of age (at time of registration), daughter of Salem Fall, Nosferatu and Matron of the Fall Coven. She was practically royalty, her mother heading the largest nation of vampire covens in all of Remnant. Suddenly Weiss felt very, very small.

"Weiss?" Ironwood's voice snapped her back to reality.

"Yes?" Weiss responded.

"I have my men establishing a presence." Ironwood explained. "Tonight we will begin sending hunting parties around the island. We will find Miss Fall, and we will bring her to justice. You have my word." He lay his fist across his heart in promise.

Weiss smiled, remembering the times Winter used to do the same, before she left the order along with her. It seemed so long ago, but it was barely more than a year at this point. "I believe you General. Thank you for coming. Will that be all?"

"That is all for business...I see the townspeople have sent their support." Ironwood gestured to the flower arrangements, by now nearly coating an entire wall of the room. "A lot of support." He stood and stepped closer to admire them.

"Fascinating isn't it?" Weiss asked. "Pyrrha's summon, Ruby, sprays them with a mix of her blood and water. At first it simply kept them fresh, but now they've taken on a life of their own."

"Is it a spriggan?" Ironwood guessed.

"That was my guess, but no." Weiss shook her head. "None of us have any idea what she is, not
even Ruby herself. But she has endeared us all, so we accept her regardless."

"And Yang?" Ironwood asked.

"Technically, she is Ruby's summon, making her Pyrrha's summon as well." Weiss explained.

"It seems rather fond of you." Ironwood observed.

"She is, likely because Ruby asked her to be." Weiss confirmed. "Regardless, she lifts my spirits, they both do."

"And you feel safe in their presence?" Ironwood pressed.

"Without any doubt." Weiss replied.

"Hmm…" Ironwood observed the IV rack, pushed into the corner, devoid of a bloodbag. "And how are you handling the thirst?"

Weiss had to suppress a shudder. She hated that term. It made her feel like a starving animal, craving water, willing to kill for it even. In a ways she was after all. She had yet to read that chapter. She just could not bear to stomach it, not yet. "I subsist on donated blood from my friends."

"Can you rely on them?" Ironwood asked.

"I believe so." Weiss answered.

"Good...good." Ironwood fell silent for a time. Weiss felt the air grow more tense. "You know, of course, that vampire covens adopt hum-"

"I will not keep a pet human to feast upon!" Weiss yelled, scandalized.

"That was not what I meant to say Weiss-" Ironwood started.

"Then what were you saying?" Weiss hissed. "That I should seek one out? Leave my life to take up with those who treat humans as cattle? I'm a parasite Ironwood, I am below humans, not the other way around. I would sooner starve."

"And if I had my way, I would see them wiped from the face of Remnant, but they are an unfortunate reality of our world." Ironwood admitted. "A symbiosis that must be acknowledged and handled properly."

"And I will handle my symbiosis properly." Weiss shot back. "When I resume my work, I will compensate those who donate, and then I will source my own sustenance legally and with as little harm to humanity was possible. Now, if there is nothing else, take your weapon and leave me in peace."

Weiss held out the cloth wrapped handcannon. Ironwood stood a moment in shock. He had certainly crossed an uncomfortable line. Truth be told the idea of Weiss feeding sickened him, the very concept of keeping humans as a source of food infuriated him on a very deep level. But he understood Weiss' plight, and felt that his approval might serve as a morale boost. He was mistaken. "I apologize Weiss, for everything that has happened to you."

Weiss flinched as he took his weapon and quickly stowed it. "So do I." She murmured, wrapping her arms around herself and nuzzling into the scarf.
Ironwood decided not to press on, and opened the door to leave. He was met with the shimmering, seething face of the fire aspect. "Get going." She glared. Ironwood sighed, striding away. At the very least Weiss was surrounded by people protective of her. He just hoped she would not be incinerated by accident.

Yang stormed into the room, as quickly as possible, to find Weiss in the same position in which she had left her, but she looked smaller, much smaller, hunched over, a dead look in her eyes, shimmering gently in the light. "Weiss." Yang knelt before her, trying to meet her gaze from below. She succeeded, only to witness the first bloody tear streak down her cheek.

"I want to make a pact with you Yang." Weiss whispered.

"Anything." Yang promised.

Weiss unwrapped her arms, reaching down to take Yang's hands in her own, bringing them up, until they rested upon her throat. "If I ever begin to lose sight of who I am, of what I am, remind me. Remind me forcefully." She squeezed Yang's hands tighter around her throat. Yang tried to gently tug them free, but she held fast. Another tear dropped from her chin, sizzling on contact with the scarf. "If I lose myself entirely, if I convince myself that I am above humanity, that I am the greater being..." The pressure increased.

"Weiss." Yang implored.

"Put me down Yang." Weiss ordered. "You kill monsters for sport. You revel in our destruction. When I lose myself I need to know someone will take responsibility. You will not be killing me, you will be killing a monster wearing my face, a shadow of what I am now. Do you understand?" She pled. "Please don't let me live like them. I'm not one of them. I don't want to be one of them. Please Yang..." Her grip finally slackened.

Yang bundled Weiss into her arms proper. "I promise Weiss, I promise you, but not a moment too soon. I won't let you lose yourself, I swear it."

"T-thank you Yang." Weiss shuddered. "Thank you."

Ruby had accompanied Pyrrha into town for the day. With Yang taking care of Weiss, she felt less guilty about leaving her for any period of time. While Pyrrha went grocery shopping, Ruby visited Velvet to play with Womp and inquire about a cloak. Ruby was not bothered by the cold, not really. It was a sensation she experienced, but felt no ill will toward. But the cloak Velvet had crafted for Weiss appealed to her. It was so long and swishy and beautiful, she wanted one made for herself. But to do so would cost money, so Ruby made a deal with Velvet. She would make her a cloak like Weiss' but in red, and Ruby would help her model clothes during the upcoming community market. Ruby saw nothing wrong with this deal and was ecstatic, her cheerful mood lasting until they arrived home to find Winter in the living room, alongside Glynda, Blake and...a metal person?

"Salutations!" A slightly distorted, but cheerful female voice greeted, her doll face twitching into a jovial smile as a jittery hand waved.

"Uh, hello?" Pyrrha greeted awkwardly.

"Hey, I'm Ruby!" She chirped, approaching the automaton.

"My name is Penny, Penny Polendina, it is a pleasure to meet you!" A robot hand jittered out
toward Ruby and she grasped it, only for Penny to rapidly shake it.

"I-it's a pleasure to meet you too!" Ruby stuttered until Penny released her.

"I apologize for my jittery nature." Penny said. "I was waylaid by an electromagnetic ward, and my motorfunction is slowly recovering."

"What are you?" Ruby wondered aloud, taking a seat beside Penny, leaning closer to inspect her segmented facial features.

"I am a transplanted soul in an automaton body." Penny replied. "What are you?"

"I'm an accident." Ruby answered.

"Father says my death was an accident, but that my life is a miracle." Penny noted.

"Isn't all life a miracle?" Ruby asked.

Penny froze for a moment, twitching. "So it is!" She finally exclaimed.

"Winter." Pyrrha sighed. "What's going on?"

"Winter decided to invite General Ironwood and his army of Templars to the island." Glynda explained.

"Wha...oh...well where is he?" Pyrrha asked.

"Speaking with Weiss about Cinder." Winter replied.

"Cinder...Cindy?" Pyrrha suggested.

"They very same." Winter confirmed.

It was at that moment an uneven thumping made its way down the hall, and a rather weary looking General Ironwood emerged into the living room. His gaze swept over Pyrrha and Ruby. "Miss Nikos."

"Hello General, how went your talk?" Pyrrha inquired.

"Not entirely well." Ironwood admitted. "I struck a nerve unintentionally and she ordered me to leave." At this Winter rushed down the hall.

"As you should." Glynda huffed.

"Glynda-" Ironwood started.

"Keep your troops out of sight of the townspeople," Glynda cut him off. "They have enough to worry about without soldiers running around, stirring up paranoia."

"If all goes well, we should not be here more than a week." Ironwood assured her. "Penny, can you stand?"

Penny planted her hands on the couch, and with a sudden jolt, pushed herself onto her feet, but her knees remained frozen, and she fell face first into the rug with a loud thud. Ruby gasped, rushing down to help. "It appears not General Ironwood sir!"
Ironwood sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Is Penny welcome to remain here until she regains motorfunction?"

"So long as she remains polite and harmless, I will tolerate her." Glynda answered.

"Thank you...I apologize for my intrusion." Ironwood groaned. "Penny, in the future, remember to active your shield generator when leaving camp."

With Ruby's help, Penny was able to jerk her way onto all fours. "I will attempt to do so!"

A patrol passed beneath the tree, three soldiers and a robot, ivory plating gleaming in the clouded moonlight. Templar soldiers, rifles held tensely, they flinched at every sound. Pathetic, green, in spite of their white. Mercury had slaughtered far more experienced examples in the past. These whelps were not even worth the effort. One of his fondest memories was of a female squad leader, strong, experienced, righteous. She had chased him into the forest with her squad, pursuing him deeper and deeper until he sprang his trap. Wounded, terrified, having witnessed him tearing her inferiors limb from limb, she had begged for her life, cracking and breaking with hardly a nudge from his alluring gaze, and right when her blood was up, as she pledged her soul to him, he had drained her dry. She was no virgin, but the taste of her blood seemed no less sweet.

With the patrol gone, Mercury dropped to the ground, shifting his prey over his shoulder, and sped off. The load was pitiful tonight, a single deer and some rabbits, the soldiers having apparently frightened off most of the local wildlife. But they would do for Cinder's pet for the time being. His own as well, he supposed, no sense letting all of her fat burn. He preferred them with curves, the one thing his own kind seemed to lack. Oh they were beautiful yes, far more beautiful than the human he lay with, but even Cinder was slighter than he would prefer. It was just how his kind were, blood brought health, then quickly drained away, leaving them frail, even if only in appearance. Humans held their shape, and when he found the right shape, he appreciated it as long and as vigorously as possible. Perhaps it was unfortunate that his hunt was so light, but regardless, the sooner he returned the better, for the forest was no longer safe. Their plans would have to be accelerated.

Striding into the cave, Mercury tossed his bag aside. It was a fairly spacious little home for the four, located in a little crevice they had discovered shortly after arriving on the island. Hydra crystals on the walls lit the area in a gentle blue glow. When Emerald needed to cook, a thermal plate provided a stable platform, and generated no smoke, so long as she was not distracted by her mistress. Cinder pampered her pet after all, returning with little gifts, extra blankets and baked goods. The cold had never bothered them, but Emerald complained about it constantly, what with fire not being an option. Mercury was thankful at least that his pet was used to the temperatures.

Walking deeper in, he brushed aside a curtain dividing the cave to reveal Cinder laying on a bearskin, reading a book as Emerald snoozed into her side. She groaned, causing Cinder to glare up at him. "We've got a problem." Mercury snidely stated.

"Master?" His pet called, his voice having awoken her. She scrambled from her own bedding in the corner. Her possessions indicated her name was Dew, but that was hardly relevant to him.

"Not now." Mercury snapped, flicking his hand, causing the girl to cower.

"Mngh, wasgoingon?" Emerald slurried.

"Have the dogs caught our scent?" Cinder asked, stroking Emerald's hair.
Mercury shook his head. "Nah, they're still scouring the south end."

"The pyro?" Cinder guessed.

"Didn't come out today, no." Mercury replied. "It's the Templars. A Bullhead full of them showed up today."

Cinder sighed, shutting her book. "Weiss left the Order, they shouldn't be here." She growled, pushing herself to her feet. Emerald followed her, pulling a crimson robe from nearby for Cinder to slip into.

"Maybe she had friends in high places, who knows." Mercury shrugged. "Fact is they're here, and they're looking for us. Had to dodge a patrol on the way back."

"Stupid, this is my fault, an island was a terrible idea." Cinder hissed, at herself more than anything.

Emerald quickly wrapped her arms around her mistress. "You had no way of predicting this Cinder. It's not your fault."

"Emerald…" Cinder sighed, grasping Emerald's arms and pulling them free to turn around. "Don't worry yourself over this." She softly ordered, cupping her face. "I will handle my mistakes, and you will stay safe." With that Cinder kissed her, none too gently at that.

Emerald loved it when Cinder was rough, passionate, treating her as an equal, not like glass. It gave her hope, that one day she would not have to hold back. "I love you." She murmured, dazed.

"I know my sweet…now take Dew and cook yourself dinner." Cinder instructed. "Mercury and I must talk."

"Yes mistress." Emerald whispered, bowing her head, picking up another robe to slip on.

"What's there to talk about?" Mercury asked as Emerald brushed past, pulling Dew to her feet and heading out the front of the cave.

When they were out of earshot, Cinder stepped closer. "Contingencies."
Chapter Summary

Steeling her resolve, Weiss presses forward...

When Weiss awoke the next morning, she decided it was time to stop laying around. First, she asked Yang to fetch Glynda, who arrived almost immediately with a fresh bloodpack. Then, after asking her several questions about her heath, Weiss came out with it. "I want to see the sun."

Glynda and Yang both stared at Weiss. "It's too early." Glynda warned.

"It's been two days." Weiss argued.

"And you nearly burned half your face off." Yang noted.

"And I'm prepared to do so again." Weiss stated firmly. She reached for Glynda's hand, taking it in her own. "I know you're worried, but I'm tired of staying cooped up in here. I need to go home."

Weiss held Glynda's gaze, until the witch let out a weary sigh. "Give me some time to prepare. We should do this slowly, to avoid another incident."

Glynda left the room, but Yang remained, continuing to express concern. At first she mixed in some humor. "If you wanted to be incinerated that bad you could just ask me nicely." Then worry. "What if you can't heal properly this time?" Both were waved off with a chuckle and a huff. Weiss was worried - how could she not be, a face full of sunlight, even muted by the clouds, had been like dunking her face in a pot of boiling water - and now here she was two days later asking for it again, in hopes that maybe, just maybe, she could get away with a tan. It was a risk she was willing to take. Any longer in this room being pitied and she would go stir crazy before she had the chance to go rabid.

Not half an hour later, Glynda returned. The hallway was nearly as dark as her room, and when Weiss followed Glynda out, IV stand in hand, so was the rest of the home, except for the gentle lamplight illuminating the way. It was as if it was day, but at the same time, clearly not. The vampire's perception was a disorienting thing. She stopped to test a theory, turning to directly face the flickering flame. A part of her screamed as pain flared in the backs of her eyes, but she smirked them away. No, the light did not her her eyes, not truly, her eyes confused her brain, and that confusion manifested in pain.

"Weiss, are you alright?" Yang asked.

"Perfectly." Weiss smirked, continuing onward. When the group reached the living room, it was to find the place slightly rearranged. The couch had been moved to the side, and a single armchair now faced the heavily curtained window. Ruby, Pyrrha and Blake were in attendance, along with an...an Atlesian automaton in a dress? "What is this?"

"Salutations!" The automaton chirped, loudly, eloquently, if overly cheerful for Weiss' tastes. "My name is Penny."
Weiss blinked, shooting a look at Blake, who seemed as bemused as always. "Very well then." Weiss sighed, taking her place in the empty seat and looking around. Glynda walked past to stand at the curtain, and Weiss felt Yang's warm presence behind her.

"Weiss, are you absolutely certain?" Glynda pressed.

"Without any doubt." Weiss confirmed.

Glynda reached into her pocket and pulled forth some shaded goggles, normally meant for use during volatile experiments, today to be used to protect Weiss' vision should the sunlight still burn. "Blake will fade the curtain slowly, bit by bit. Each time you are ready, say green to continue." Glynda explained, handing over the goggles. "If the pain is too much you are to say red, and I expect you to do so Weiss. I will not watch you burn yourself alive out of stubbornness. Am I clear?" She insisted sternly.

Weiss buckled the goggles around her head, adjusting the fit for comfort, before looking around. Her vision barely seemed affected. Ruby held back a giggle when she looked her way, and Weiss found herself smiling. "Crystal."

Glynda nodded, turning away to take a deep breath, then moving to stand opposite Blake by the window's side. "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be." Weiss gripped the armrests firmly.

Glynda met Blake's gaze and nodded. "Begin."

The curtains faded, and a dim light began to fill the room. For the rest it was barely enough to match the lamplight, but to Weiss it was as if the room had suddenly become rather stuffy. Her skin felt uncomfortable, an urge to shudder prevailed. "Green."

Another wave of heat suddenly filled the room. Now Weiss' skin started to tingle, not all over, but for a brief moment she flashed back to her last encounter, seeing the outside world for the first time, before the pain filled her existence. But now the tingling was random, and in spite of the discomfort, the warmth was almost pleasant. "Green."

The tingling came back in force, covering most of Weiss' exposed skin, and some that was covered. The urge to hide away struck her, but she bit down, taking a long, deep breath in and out. She grinned. "Green."

The tingling intensified, then in some strange transition, faded into an almost numb sensation. It was as if her skin was being buffeted by fine, hot sand. It was tolerable, if irritating. "Green."

This time nothing changed. "That's it Weiss." Blake grinned. "You did it."

"That's it?" Weiss asked. "I-I'm fine?"

"Way to go Weiss!" Ruby cheered as Penny clacked her metallic hands together.

"Congratulations Weiss." Pyrrha sighed in relief.

"Remind me to bring dad a gift basket." Yang joked.

"How does it feel?" Glynda asked, approaching and taking Weiss' hand to inspect it closely.

"Like a hot sand bath." Weiss described. Glynda's touch felt muted. "Everything is almost numb,
"And how did it progress?" Glynda released Weiss' hand, pulling a notepad and pencil from her pocket to scribble down the answers.

"It was uncomfortably warm, then a little tingly, then very tingly, then numb." Weiss explained. Glynda wrote as Weiss spoke, nodding, looking relieved, grinning. "Well, now all that's left is to go outside. It's still overcast, so no direct sunlight yet, but with luck by then you will have become more resistant."

"Good." Weiss stood, stumbling a bit, suddenly feeling oddly drained. "Oh gods." Weiss felt herself supported by both Glynda and Yang, and returned to her chair.

"Don't get too far ahead of yourself." Glynda warned. "The sun might not burn, but it still cripples. Blake." Glynda looked to Blake, who summoned the curtain back into existence.

Weiss felt like a massive weight had suddenly been lifted from her chest, and she gulped down air she did not realize she was missing. "Ugh, fine...just stick me in a box or something." She slurred, feeling a sudden headache.

Glynda sighed wearily. "Yang, take Weiss to pack her things. When you're ready, I'll teleport you myself."

"Thank you Glynda." Weiss smiled.

"I'm prodding you extra hard when you assist me with my research." Glynda grumbled, leaving the room. Blake chuckled, shooting Weiss a grin as she followed.

"I'll help you pack!" Ruby offered.

"I will...attempt to assist." Pyrrha added.

"I will...I don't know what I can do, but I am ready to help!" Penny announced.

"No, no, it's alright." Weiss waved them off. "Yang and I can handle it. Just...give me some privacy please. Yang?" Weiss held out her hand and Yang grasped it, helping her up. "We won't be long."

Weiss held Yang's hand even as they reentered her room. She stopped, breathing slowly, Yang stepping close once more, wrapping her in a heated embrace. Weiss leaned back into her, head lolling onto Yang's shoulder. "Are you okay?" Yang murmured.

Weiss hummed. "Did you stay in the fireplace of my home?" She had not thought about what Yang did in her home. Ruby said Yang liked to stay in Glynda's fireplace, so she made the connection herself.

"Yeah, it was pretty roomie." Yang replied. "Before your sister bitched me out."

Weiss hummed again. "Will you come with me?" She whispered, as if scared of the answer.

"Of course I will." Yang stated as if it were obvious.

Maybe it was, but Weiss never liked to take things for granted. "You're not obligated to."

"I'm not." Yang nodded.
"I'm high maintenance." Weiss warned.

"I'm persistent." Yang assured her.

"You don't have better things to do?" Weiss challenged.

"I have an eternity Weiss." Yang noted. "My time is worthless, yours is precious."

Weiss laughed at that. "That sounded better in your head."

"Oh yeah, totally." Yang chuckled. "But still, I've got nothing better to do. You're my priority."

Weiss merely nodded, humming once more. Yang raised her temperature a few more degrees, and the vampire sighed. "I suppose I had best begin. Though there isn't much."

"Hmm." Yang hummed.

"That means you need to let go." Weiss observed.

"Hmm, you don't want that." Yang surmised.

Weiss felt a grin tug at her lips. "I don't want a lot of things."

"Well, why don't we get Ruby in here then?" Yang suggested.

"Because one aspect hanging off of me is more than enough." Weiss tried to snap, but the fondness tinting her voice rendered it moot.

"You don't mean that." Yang chuckled.

Weiss sighed. "No, no I don't."

Weiss had only been teleported by Glynda once before. It had been during an emergency. A storm was coming, protective wards needed to be reinforced, shelters needed to be staffed. Glynda had suddenly appeared in her study, nearly giving Weiss a heart attack in the process. In the middle of a lecture about knocking, Glynda had taken her hand, and suddenly she was weightless. It reminded her of free-falling, having jumped off a diving board high up, nothing but air rushing by, but this time from all directions. Her sense of direction was lost, and then the ground slammed into her feet, and she found herself staggering, nearly falling before Glynda steadied her.

The rest of that night had been a slog. The wards were extensive, the people panicky and afraid, and all the while Weiss never really shook the alien feeling of teleportation. It clung to the back of her mind like a stain. She found herself lost in thought at times, going over the experience, brief as it was, trying to recall what she saw, like a dream escaping her mind's grasp. It had frustrated her for days afterward, until she finally snapped, visiting Glynda and asking just what the hell had happened when they teleported, and why she could not stop obsessing over it.

Glynda had hesitated, at first displeased that her work had been interrupted, and then worried and uncertain. "Do you value your soul Weiss?" She had asked. Weiss had been taken off guard by such a question. Of course she did, what an obvious thing, and she said as much. "Then you will listen well when I tell you that this magic, when handled improperly, can and will fragment your mind and soul, and that's if you survive the journey without becoming lost in the void."

Glynda explained what exactly teleportation was. Weiss had never learned. It was considered forbidden by her father's sect of the Templar Order, and according to Winter, used only in
emergencies by Ironwood. That was because teleportation involved opening a portal to the 
inbetween, the realm between realms, the Great Void.

Static teleporters were safer, but stricter, requiring power from an external source and constant 
maintenance by skilled practitioners. They created a secure bridge between locations. Glynda 
described her teleportation as throwing a grappling hook across a gap. It worked, but required more 
skill and effort, and it took a toll on her soul. The Void hungered, tugging at all who pass through, 
and while most aspects would not be affected by this, the unique relationship between human body 
and soul was far more delicate. A tug would mark a human, like a bruise, or a scratch, itching as it 
healed, nagging at the mortal mind and body, as it was doing to Weiss.

Glynda was fortunate. Her relationship, her bond with Blake meant she was more resilient to the 
effects, and should she make a mistake, could rely on Blake to ensure her safety. But others were 
reliant on her protection too, and it seemed in her haste, Glynda had neglected to extend such 
protection to Weiss. So she experienced the full effects of the Void's toll. Glynda apologized, 
assuring Weiss that the discomfort would pass, offering her a tome on the subject. Weiss had 
refused, much to Glynda's evident shock, and less obviously, her relief.

There was good reason the Templars forbade teleportation, Weiss reckoned. If even Glynda could 
be at risk of losing herself, if even Glynda was genuinely afraid of it, Weiss was in no position to 
take such a risk. At least not yet, not until she was far more knowledgeable.

And now here Weiss was, travelling the Void once more, and she could not help but wonder if her 
soul still held value, if the tattered, cursed remains would even withstand the journey. The 
experience felt distinctly different. She was prepared this time, holding Glynda's hand securely in 
her left, and Yang's in her right. She either did not feel fear, or did not care for the danger. And 
before Weiss knew it, they were surrounded by the dimly lit interior of her home.

Pyrrha had refused to join them, plastering on a smile and stating that she preferred the exercise. 
Ruby and Penny would walk along with her. Blake had left in advance on Glynda's instruction, to 
ensure the house was dimmed for Weiss' arrival. The interior felt at once familiar and alien. So 
much had changed since she had left, and yet so little. Between Yang and Winter, every surface 
had been cleaned and tidied. Heavy drapes had been installed over every window, and...the 
mirror…

"Weiss?" Yang called as Weiss walked forward, staring for the first time at her reflection, clear as 
day, gaunt, pale, but still...her.

"We found aluminium replacements for your silver mirrors." Blake noted, emerging from the 
study. "It'll help you adjust, being able to see your own reflection."

"I hadn't thought of that." Weiss murmured, opening her mouth in a snarl, baring her fangs. It was 
strange, seeing her canines so long and so pointed. She should have felt repulsed. But to her 
surprise, she found the sight almost alluring.

"I know I wrote a page on the subject somewhere, but I think it occurred to me late, so it was out of 
reasonable order." Glynda explained. "I apologize."

"You have nothing to apologize for Glynda." Weiss chuckled, shutting her mouth and turning to 
face the witch. "I can't thank you enough, for everything."

"You can thank me by taking your time." Glynda noted. "Wait at least another week before you 
start going out during the day. Try ingesting blood orally instead of intravenously." She stepped 
forward and met Weiss in an embrace. "And come to me if you need anything. I mean it."
Weiss nodded, burying her face in Glynda's collar, trying to ignore the loud beating evident within, or the sudden power of her scent. "I promise." Weiss vowed as she pulled away, turning to regard the room, stepping close to the fireplace. "Yang, you've more than earned a rest." She smiled softly at the aspect.

Yang beamed, and with a flash of flame, shot into the hearth, her face rematerializing among the incensed flames. "Feels comfier than last time." She admired.

"I threw some fire salts in there." Blake said.

"Ooh, my favorite!" Yang cheered.

"I need to sort my jewelry, and silverware." Weiss noted. "Gods there's a lot of silver in this house."

"Winter already did so." Blake gestured to a box by the door. "But she wasn't here when I arrived."

"She'll be with Ironwood I suppose." Weiss guessed.

"Ooh, forbidden love." Yang mocked.

"Yang." Glynda roused as Blake snickered.

"She wishes." Weiss casually commented, setting her bag on one of the tables. "But I didn't say that." She turned to point at Yang. "And you will not repeat it, am I clear?"

Yang rolled her eyes. "I'm snarky, not cruel." She defended.

"I know...it's just that Ironwood, despite how callous he can be, is the closest thing to a father Winter has." Weiss explained. "He saved her from our blood father, and when I was persecuted, he saved me in turn."

"Persecuted?" Yang questioned.

Weiss chuckled. "It's a long story Yang. I'll tell you another time."

"Is this one of those I need time things?" Yang asked.

"It's one of those I need a block of chocolate things." Weiss joked.

"Oh, okay then!" Yang chirped.

"Port will be making his rum balls soon." Blake noted.

"Oh gods, I always forget about those." Weiss very nearly moaned. "Thank gods vampires can still eat."

"I imagine once word spreads of your recovery, you will receive many gifts, in addition to the goodwill gifts we usually receive." Glynda observed.

"Should we tell them to avoid garlic?" Blake smirked.

"I'm still unsure how to handle that." Weiss worried, leaning against the table. "On one hand, with the full story they should be accepting, after all I have done for this town, and the reasons many came here...but there's still that worry that they will reject me regardless. A friendly pa...a friendly vampire is still a vampire." She sighed, pushing off the table, crossing the room to pick up the box.
of silverware. "I should take this to Port. He can melt it down and cast daggers-

A sudden knocking interrupted Weiss, and Glynda brushed through the curtains covering the entrance nook. A few moments later, the door opened and Pyrrha stepped through. "Ruby is walking Penny back to her camp, so she'll be here later."

"Does Velvet have any combat training?" Weiss suddenly asked.

"I...don't believe so, why?" Pyrrha inquired.

"I'm going to have Port forge her a silver dagger." Weiss explained. "I'll need to train her in its use."

"Oh-" Pyrrha started.

"You should train Ruby too." Weiss advised. "Regardless of what she is or what she may be capable of, I don't like the idea of someone trying to hurt her, even if it does no real harm."

"I don't think Ruby is the type for violence Weiss." Pyrrha noted.

"The world doesn't care what type we are Pyrrha." Weiss scoffed, dropping the box on the table with a little more force than was needed, the crash making everyone in the room flinch, even Yang. "Ruby is your summon. It's your responsibility to keep her safe. Either ensure she can defend herself, or never let her out of your sight."
"Unknown?" Sergeant Hori balked, giving the scanner a slap. Manning the camp's entrance checkpoint was usually a boring job - identify the soldiers coming in, scan them to prevent shape-shifters from infiltrating the camp, wait for the next squad. But the current situation was both annoying and confounding. First he had struggled to explain to Penny that civilians were not allowed in the camp, then after she insisted, effectively pulling rank, he had scanned her companion only for the scanner to come up with an error. "Uh...hold on." He picked up the backup scanner and pointed it at the girl. *Unknown*. He pointed it at Penny, and it identified her properly. He pointed it back at the girl. *Unknown*. "What are you?"

"I'm Ruby!" The girl chirped.

"No, I mean, *what* are you?" Hori shook his head. "The scanner just says 'unknown.'"

"She is not unknown, she is my friend Ruby!" Penny cheered.

The two automatons flanking Hori snapped to attention. "Welcome Friend Ruby!" They droned.

"Just uh...give me a minute." Hori requested. Normally when faced with an issue like this, he would call in his immediate superior, but in all matters involving Penny, he was supposed to contact General Ironwood. He pulled the radio to his mouth and pressed the button. "Sergeant Hori to General Ironwood, over."

"Go ahead soldier, over." Ironwood's voice crackled over the radio.

"Penny's trying to bring a friend into camp sir." Hori explained. "The scanner reads her as unknown, over."

Ironwood audibly sighed. "I'll be right down, over and out."

"How has your day been?" Penny asked as the group waited for the general to arrive.

"It was going pretty well...until now." Hori complained.

"That ship is so cool!" Ruby enthused, peering through the fence at the camp within. "It's huge! And there are so many tents! It's like a whole new town just appeared overnight!"

General Ironwood jogged to the checkpoint, Hori and the automatons saluting him. "At ease soldier." He ordered as he saluted back. "Penny, who is this?"

"This is my friend Ruby!" Penny replied.

"Oh yes, I've heard about you." Ironwood nodded. "Pyrrha's summon, yes?"
"Yep!" Ruby confirmed.

"May Ruby join us in camp?" Penny requested.

Ironwood paused, thinking for a moment. "Well alright. I'll need to search your bag first." He pointed to the satchel slung over Ruby's shoulder.

"Sure!" Ruby agreed, handing over the bag.

The first item Ironwood extracted was a spray bottle containing a red liquid. "What's this?"

"That's some of my blood mixed with water." Ruby answered. "I spray it on plants and it makes them grow!"

Putting the bottle aside, Ironwood next extracted some flowers Ruby had collected. At the very bottom he came to a sheathed dagger. "Why do you have a weapon?"

"I just use that when I need to draw my blood." Ruby explained. "It's made of shadows!"

"Well, the dagger will have to stay here at the checkpoint." Ironwood declared. "You can pick it up on your way out."

"Okay!" Ruby smiled, picking up her bag. "Let's go Penny!"

"Penny, feel free to show Ruby anything unclassified." Ironwood cautioned. "Once you're done I'd like to speak with Ruby in the medbay."

"Yes sir General Ironwood!" Penny saluted. She was soon pulled along by Ruby, who had obviously spotted something interesting.

"What is she sir?" Hori asked.

"I haven't the faintest idea, but all indications are she's harmless," Ironwood replied. "Former Specialist Schnee will be keeping a discreet eye on her though."

After showing Ruby some of the automatons she controlled, Penny took her to visit Ren and Nora. The werewolves had been serving as guides for nighttime patrols. Unfortunately, they were asleep, and Ruby decided not to bother them. After a visit to the mess tent, during which Ruby was given a freeze-dried field ration to take home, the pair moved on to the firing range. They found it mostly empty, except for a single soldier who was documenting her performance.

"Ooh, what's that?" Ruby asked, pointing to the soldier's rifle, which was resting on a table.

"That's Specialist Zedong's sniper rifle." Penny answered.

"It's really cool!" Ruby squealed. Without touching the weapon, she looked at it from several angles. She gazed down the scope, which glowed a soft green. "How does it work?"

"Specialist Zedong, may I demonstrate the use of your weapon?" Penny requested. The soldier looked up from her score sheet, stared at Penny for a moment, then nodded. "Is it loaded?" The Specialist shook her head. Penny picked up the rifle, moving to one of the firing positions. A box of ammunition was positioned to the side, and Penny grabbed a single rifle bullet from it. After sliding the bolt back, she slipped the round into the rifle, pushing the bolt forward to chamber it. "You may want to cover your ears. This will be loud!"

"Alright." Ruby duly placed her hands over her ears.
"Firing!" Penny announced. She took aim at the target and squeezed the trigger. With a deafening crack, the rifle fired, and the bullet slammed into the center of the metal target. Penny pulled the bolt back, ejecting the spent shell. She engaged the safety and stepped back. "Weapon is safe!" She walked over to Specialist Zedong and handed over the weapon. "Thank you for allowing us to use your weapon." The soldier just stared at Penny, taking the rifle in hand and placing it on a nearby table.

"That-was-awesome!" Ruby leapt with joy.

"It is quite an impressive weapon." Penny observed.

Penny and Ruby headed for the ship, to meet General Ironwood in the medbay as requested. "She was kind of strange." Ruby observed.

"Specialists can be a bit odd." Penny noted. "Their job is very stressful, and they usually work alone."

Ruby thought for a moment. "Oh, I guess Winter's kind of...uh...different too."

Winter met Ironwood in the medbay, in anticipation of Ruby's arrival. "General Ironwood." She saluted.

"At ease." Ironwood responded, returning the salute. "Did you get the sample of Nikos' blood?"

"Yessir." Winter confirmed. "What do you intend to do with it?"

"Glynda compared it to Ruby's blood and found it identical." Ironwood noted. "But she doesn't have access to the technology we do. I intend to find out what Ruby is."

"What do you think she is?" Winter asked.

"I haven't the faintest idea." Ironwood admitted. "Some of its properties are consistent with spriggans, but Ruby is clearly not one. Perhaps it's something new, a cross between human and spriggan for instance."

"She does seem to have a strong connection to nature." Winter nodded. "Not to mention a penchant for getting everyone to like her. She's like an excitable child."

The door slid open and Ruby burst in. "Hey Winter!" She chirped. "Oh! I'm supposed to tell you that Weiss moved back home. And...well I know you'll probably be mad but...uh...Yang moved in with her." Winter blinked, jaw dropping in shock, before heaving a heavy sigh.

Penny stepped in behind her. "General Ironwood, Former Specialist Schnee." She saluted. "Why did you want us to meet you here?"

"Ruby, I'd like a sample of your blood to test." Ironwood replied. "You don't know what you are, correct?" Ruby shook her head. "But you want to?"

"Yep!" Ruby confirmed.

"The equipment here might be able to answer that question." Ironwood explained.

"Okay, where do you need my blood?" Ruby asked.

"Where?" Ironwood asked in confusion.
"Yeah, where?" Ruby grabbed a scalpel and jabbed it into her arm, generating a spurt of blood that floated and pooled in the air. "Just tell me where to put it."

Taken completely off guard by the shocking display, Ironwood was left speechless. Luckily Winter was able to step in. "Just fill this vial." Winter held up a small glass vessel.

"Oh, easy." Ruby's blood streamed through the air and into the vial, quickly filling it. The remainder was sucked back into her arm, the wound closing behind it.

"That...thank you Ruby," Ironwood regained his composure. "The tests will take some time, but if I learn anything I'll inform Glynda."

Winter capped the vial and handed it to the general. "Shall I escort her back to town?"

"Yes, do that." Ironwood nodded.

"Alright Ruby, let's go." Winter instructed.

"Okay." Ruby agreed. "Bye Penny, bye General Ironwood."

"Goodbye Ruby!" Penny smiled. "I look forward to meeting you again."

Ruby bounced out of the room, closely followed by Winter. "Penny...did you see that?" Ironwood asked once the pair were gone.

"Her blood manipulation?" Penny asked. "Yes. It was quite impressive."

Ironwood shook his head. "That's one word for it."

Winter's trip with Ruby was interesting. At first, conversation was one-sided, Ruby talking about how wonderful the camp was, the Airship, Penny's automatons, Specialist Zedong's rifle, the Atlesian armor and strangely packaged food. They were all just part of the regular scenery for Winter, but new and exciting to Ruby. Eventually that enthusiasm began to crack Winter's facade. The childlike summon reminded her of her own childhood, spent idolizing the soldiers who protected her family, her city, her home. She remembered a Specialist telling a tale of a werewolf he had hunted, slaughtering her children before the beast herself...oh...in light of Nora and Ren's relatively pleasant, if odd, existence, perhaps that Specialist had been a tad psychotic.

Regardless, Winter looked up to the Templars as a child, and seeing Ruby so enthused by different aspects of their operation did a little to soften her opinion of the summon. She truly did seem innocent. Or Ruby was an extremely good actor, and a pathological liar to boot. That was always a distinct possibility, however slight. Still, she had helped Weiss when neither she nor Winter were in the right state of mind, and the only reason she was here now was because she entrusted Yang to do so in her stead. That trust had to mean something if Weiss, the least intimate person Winter knew, was willing to share warmth skin-to-skin with her. Not to mention vouch for her personally.

The image of Weiss' intimacy with Yang was burned in the back of Winter's mind. Weiss had fallen victim to her heart once, and now a new threat had been openly welcomed into her bed. There was no way Winter could not worry for her, especially now that she had moved home. Weiss would be alone, with Yang, a fire aspect. A fire aspect that had vowed to kill her should she lose control. Winter almost wished she had not overheard that exchange.

"Ruby." Winter interrupted the aspect's rambling as they approached Weiss' home.
"Yes Winter?" Ruby chirped.

"I would like to speak with Weiss alone, please." Winter requested, politely this time, attempting to take into account Weiss' request that she be nicer to the summon.

"Okay, I'll wait outside." Ruby readily agreed.

Not that Winter expected refusal, but complete acceptance was not something to which she was used. "Thank you."

The pair continued walking the path in silence, which was pleasant, but odd. "Hey Winter?" Ruby spoke up as they passed Weiss' herb garden.

Winter had refreshed the environmental wards, but she had to admit, it was not her best work. Weiss or Glynda would have to make another pass. Winter's specialty had always been offensive and defensive spells. It was Weiss who sought to bend reality. "Yes Ruby?" Winter replied, turning her attention to the aspect.

"I like you, even if you don't like me." Ruby stated with a kind smile and bright eyes, her tone as jovial and innocent as ever.

For the first time Winter felt a stab of guilt. Ruby was like an abused puppy, offering her love in spite of being kicked one too many times. "I don't..." Winter sighed, turning away. "Thank you Ruby." Winter breathed, brushing the hair from her face and continuing on to Weiss' door. She knocked twice before entering.

Left to her own devices, Ruby did what she normally did - explore and experiment. The first stop was Weiss' herb garden. It was modest, containing only a half dozen herbs that - according to an herbology book Ruby had read - were either rare or difficult to reliably harvest in the wild, so it made sense for Weiss to cultivate them by hand. Ruby could feel something in the air. Pyrrha had explained them after they came up, passive protective spells meant to nullify minor elements by subtly altering the reality affected. As the winter season approached, the cold would strangle valuable herbs such as these, and indeed even with the wards in place they seemed a little unhealthy to Ruby's eye. So she reached into her satchel and pulled out her spray bottle, giving the garden a generous soak with her blood-infused water. Already their color seemed more vibrant.

"It never ceases to amaze me." Pyrrha's voice suddenly came from behind Ruby.

Ruby beamed, spinning around to rush into Pyrrha's arms. "Pyrrha!" She yelled excitedly into her chest.

"Ruby, how was your visit?" Pyrrha asked, running her fingers gently through her summon's hair.

"It was awesome!" Ruby cheered. "Penny has a family, kinda', and one of the Specialists had this thing called a sniper and it had bits the moved and glowed, and Ren and Nora were there, and Ironwood seemed to like me, and they have these things called MRE's that are a lot of food in a little package and they gave me one to try!" Ruby fumbled with her satchel again, pulling free a large brown packet wrapped in plastic. "It's so interesting, there's so many new things to experience. The world is beautiful Pyrrha."

It was comical seeing Ruby clutching the packet of rations like a Solstice present. During her own training with Port, she had been forced to eat similar rations and could barely stomach them. Port did it to encourage his charges - learn to hunt for your own food or be stuck eating garbage. The memory soon faded, and Pyrrha was pained that she would have to steer the conversation into
"That's wonderful Ruby." Pyrrha smiled. "I can show you how it works later, but for now I need to talk about something important with you." Pyrrha steered Ruby to a nearby rock, where they both sat.

"Is Weiss okay?" Ruby asked.

"Weiss is fine, just worried, understandably so." Pyrrha sighed, wrapping her cloak around Ruby's shoulders and pulling her close. "The world can be a very dangerous place Ruby, even for people such as Weiss and I. You are my responsibility. I brought you into this world, and I will protect you with my life. But I won't always be around to do so, and I don't expect you to spend all of your time hidden beneath my cloak."

Ruby chuckled. "I don't mind, it's cozy in here." She admired, hugging up to her mistress.

Pyrrha laughed, giving Ruby a squeeze. "I know Ruby, but the fact remains, we won't always be together, and even when we are, I would feel safer if I know you can defend yourself. Do you understand?" Pyrrha put a sterner tone and emphasis on those final words, looking Ruby in the eyes. Bright as they were, they seemed to harden.

"I understand." Ruby confirmed. "Are you going to teach me to use a spear?"

"Maybe not a spear." Pyrrha replied. "I think a short sword or dagger would be more suitable for you, easier to carry, simpler to learn. I don't expect you to go into battle, ever if I have anything to say about it, I just want you to be safe."

"I can train your powers." Blake's voice suddenly cut in, the dark summon sauntering up to the pair's perch.

"You can?" Ruby asked.

"From my point of view, your blood is your essence, and just like my shadows, it can be shaped, and if I teach you to shape it, perhaps we can explore other possibilities." Blake explained.

"You will have to excuse me from such demonstrations." Pyrrha plastered on a queasy smile. "At least...until you have more practice."

"With luck I could have her forming weaponry within a fortnight." Blake suggested.

"Then what about this?" Ruby pulled the dagger Blake had fashioned her from her satchel, unsheathing it. The blood infused shadowsteel glimmered in the dulled sunlight.

"It was my gift to you Ruby." Blake smiled. "So long as you carry it, the dark shall never harm you."

Upon entering Weiss house, Winter found herself facing a curtain. Right, she remembered, Blake had installed them several days prior, but this one was new, and clever. It was typical of Blake, the only spirit to ever cross Winter and leave her humbled. Brushing past the curtains she ignored the others present and immediately went to Weiss, who accepted her embrace without protest. "It is good to see you on your feet Weiss."

"It feels good." Weiss responded.
"I apologize for not being here." Winter whispered.

"It's okay." Weis soothed, nuzzling into her shoulder. "I'm glad you're here now." Weiss' arms remained firm around Winter, then suddenly slackened as Weiss pushed away, putting several paces between the two and taking a deep breath, rubbing her temples.

"You okay Weiss?" Yang's voice emanated from the fireplace, the aspect pulling herself from the flames as if they were water.

"Yes Yang, thank you, just…" Weiss took a deep breath, letting it out loudly, centering herself. "Just my senses. They still overwhelm me at times." Weiss smiled weakly, but genuinely at the aspect.

Winter steeled herself. "I would like to speak with you, in private please." Winter requested of Yang.

Everyone in the room looked surprised, bar Blake, who merely walked past into Weiss' study. Glynda and Pyrrha looked from each other, to Yang, who looked to Weiss questioningly. "Fine, don't destroy my living room." Weiss said to neither in particular, following Blake.

"Ruby is outside Pyrrha." Winter noted. "She would appreciate the company."

"Oh good, I was getting worried." Pyrrha smiled in relief, hurrying to exit.

Glynda regarded Winter and Yang with a worried stare. "The bedroom has a soundproofing ward." She informed, before heading into the study with the others and closing the door.


"Soundproofing, in the bedroom, hah." Yang laughed, turning to enter said room.

Winter huffed. "Weiss is a light sleeper. The wards work both ways you perverted…" Winter grumbled as Yang laugh her off, following her into the room. Winter felt a shudder as the ward came into effect, the near pitch black room lit only by Yang's softly glowing hair.

"So give it to me straight." Yang said cheerfully. A candle flickered into existence, followed by several more as Yang went about the room, until it was lit by a soft, amber glow. "Is this a big sister talk, or mortal enemy talk?"
"It's natural to miss the people we care for when they're gone."

"You're not my mortal enemy Yang." Winter sighed, taking a seat on the bed. "And yes, I am worried for my sister, and it seems you are as well."

"Of course I am." Yang defended. "She's Ruby's friend, and now she's my friend."

"You have to understand, before now, Weiss was not the type for friends." Winter explained. "Now all of the sudden she's very vulnerable and utterly surrounded by them. You especially." The bed suddenly bounced, and Winter looked to her side to see Yang lying next to her, glowing blonde mane splayed out across the sheets. It was a beautiful sight, Winter had to admit, if grudgingly.

"So what, you're afraid we're gonna' take advantage of her?" Yang asked.

"At one point, yes." Winter confirmed. "As was common during Weiss' and my own younger years. But now, I'm more worried that Weiss will start giving more than she's ready to allow."

At this, Yang frowned, screwing up her face in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I overheard you, after the General visited." Winter hissed, hunching over to hide her face. She could feel tears welling in her eyes already, rubbing them dry. "She expected me to take that responsibility Yang, but I couldn't. Eyes blackened, teeth at my throat, I would let her drain me dry before harming a hair on her head."

Yang remained silent as Winter composed herself. She had expected anger, she had expected coldness, but misery took her off guard and tugged at her soul. She had met people like Winter before, seemingly set in their ways, leading personal crusades against her kind, and others. Time and time again she had seen them fall, sometimes by her own hand. Perhaps in another life, another time, Winter would have been her victim, but it seemed in this one, they were a strange kind of comrades.

"What do you want me to do Winter?" Yang asked.

Winter turned to the aspect in surprise. They stared at each other, until Winter took a breath. "Take care of my sister Yang. Reign her in, should she push herself too far. Weiss has always been as much a danger to herself as others, only now she has reason for her self loathing." Winter swallowed the lump in her throat, lifting a leg onto the bed and turning to face Yang proper. "I escaped my father's influence as soon as I was able, Weiss stayed out of a misguided belief that as her father, he loved her, and deserved her love in turn. But she was wrong, and it is purely because of Ironwood's support that I was able to save her from his wrath. Now her heart has seen her turned into this..." Winter hesitated, scowling off at a corner of the room. "We were raised to view those inhuman as beneath us, and time and time again, that belief has been justified."

"And now here she is, cuddling up to a demon, I know, I know how it looks." Yang admitted. "I'm
not a succubus Winter, I'm a fire goddess. I don't get summoned to make people happy. I'm summoned because I burn, and more often than not the things I'm incinerating are just as misunderstood as me, and I hate it, that feeling of binding magic, strangling my essence, compelling me to obey. It's torture. Kill they say, this troll ate a few sheep. I saw a werewolf and I want its teeth. I have a grudge against one of my own kind and I want their death to be slow!"

Yang's voice rose in volume, her eyes glowing like red hot coals. She sat up, glaring Winter in the eyes. "Have you ever been ordered to kill someone, something, and it had no business being attacked?" Yang's voice suddenly wavered, her expression sorrowful. "Have you ever had someone beg you for their life, had every inch of you want to just close your eyes and let them go, only to find yourself holding their blackened skull?"

Winter could only stare in shock as glowing tears streaked down Yang's cheeks. The aspect pulled herself out of bed, her hair flowing through the air with ethereal flame as she paced over to Weiss' desk. She opened several drawers until one tinkled, and pulled free a small vial. Observing her reflection in a mirror, she used it to scoop up some of the liquid.

"Tears of Flame, figured Weiss might have a use for them." Yang laughed breathlessly. "That's the difference with Weiss, Winter." She set the vial down, turning to lean against the desk. "I'm here by choice. Sure, Ruby invited me here, I'm not bound to anyone but her. I'm free to do what I want, but she asked me, asked me to spend time with Weiss, so I did. And for the first time in my existence a human, vampire, whatever, appreciated me for me. She talked to me, I listened. I talked to her, she listened. And when she asked me to come with her, I agreed, because it was my choice, my choice Winter, to stay by your sister's side, because in less than a day she showed me more care and consideration and appreciation than most of the humans I've met during my existence, because she's the first of your kind my presence brought happiness...because I feel good when she smiles."

Yang ended with a fond smile, the likes of which Winter had never expected to see from Yang, let alone an in-depth perspective of a bound summon. Truth be told, Winter had not once considered the experience from the other side, even having met Blake numerous times over the years. She had never thought to ask. She just silently accepted that Blake had defeated her, and submitted to Glynda. It made sense in her mind. Perhaps if she gave thought to the experiences Blake endured under Taurus' command, she would have been more sympathetic, or at least less angry that Glynda let her go free. It was times like these when Winter realized how narrow her worldview was. Perhaps Weiss was the wise one, trusting in Glynda, trusting in Ruby, trusting in Yang.

"Thank you, Yang." Winter finally spoke.

"For what?" Yang asked.

"Opening my eyes." Winter answered, standing. "I...have a lot to think about, but for the time being I must focus on hunting Cinder. And knowing that I can trust you, that you are dedicated to Weiss' happiness, brings me great relief."

"Careful." Yang chuckled. "I'm almost convinced you like me now."

Winter rolled her eyes, shooting Yang a wry smile. "Perhaps it runs in the family, hmm?"

The flames seemed so dull with Yang gone, Ruby observed, as she sat waiting in the living room. The whole house seemed dull really. She missed Yang, she missed Weiss, but they had each other, and Ruby had Pyrrha and Blake and Glynda, so it was unfair to complain. She was thankful for their company, and went out of her way to assist them. Pyrrha was simple. Sometimes she just needed a helping hand, fetch some ingredients, look up a page, copy down notes, tell her how great
she is when she is feeling down...Pyrrha was her mistress, and she served dutifully, because nothing felt better than making Pyrrha happy, not even eating cookies. And cookies were amazing.

Glynda preferred solitude, excepting Blake, and that was only because the aspect was generally silent, dozing in her feline form, her company alone raising Glynda's spirits. But still, Ruby found a few little ways to help her, refreshing her coffee, bringing her lunch - which also allowed Pyrrha to focus more on her own studies and training - and providing blood to keep her ingredients and gardens healthy.

Blake, on the other hand, simply enjoyed interacting with another of her kind, and likewise, Ruby felt the same. Before Yang came along, she was her senior. It brought comfort to have an elder aspect to look up to. Blake had already taught her to read and write, skills that had brought her much joy, absorbing books one by one, so much knowledge, so many interesting and beautiful things, all experienced thanks to Blake's initiative. Every night Blake would recommend her a new book to read, and every morning Ruby could find herself brimming with newfound knowledge to gush over. It brought Blake a sense of pride, seeing Ruby grow, and though recent events had limited their time together, that was about to change.

"Ruby." Blake spoke, joining her beside the fire. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm well, I think." Ruby replied. "I just hope Weiss and Yang are alright alone."

"I think they can handle one night in isolation." Blake joked.

"I know, it's just...I liked having them here." Ruby sighed. "Penny too. Now everything is back to normal and it feels weird."

"It's natural to miss the people we care for when they're gone." Blake encouraged.

"Isn't it selfish to want them with you all the time?" Ruby asked.

"No, it shows how much you care for them." Blake wrapped an arm around Ruby's shoulders. Ruby leaned into Blake's side. Blake was not as warm as Yang, nor was she as cold as Weiss. Blake was...neither warm nor cold really, more like the absence of temperature. Ruby found the feeling oddly pleasant. "I care about them a lot, I care about all of you a lot."

"And we care about you too." Blake chuckled, pecking Ruby on the temple. "Are you ready to learn?"

"I always am!" Ruby cheered.

Blake pulled away, turning to sit cross-legged before Ruby. "Good. Tonight I will teach you the fundamentals. We start simple, and work our way down into more finite weaving, and once you can do that, it's all about instinct. Because that is what we are, just as our bodies move, our essence will flow according to our will. But to run, a child must first learn to walk." Blake reached forward, grinning as she lay a hand upon Ruby's knee. "And I expect you'll be sprinting by the end of the month." Ruby's eyes shone with excitement as Blake pulled back, summoning a tendril of dark that curled about her left hand. "Do as I do." Blake instructed.

Ruby reached for her nearby satchel, pulling free the blade Blake had gifted her, unsheathing it, and slicing her wrist, allowing a comparable amount of blood to flow free before willing the wound shut, the crimson stream snaking through her fingers.

"Good, now." Blake held her hands as if manipulating a marionette, the dark tendrils hanging from
invisible strings. A twitch of her fingers, and it flickered into smaller tendrils, which wound into ropes. Another flicker, threads, a curl of her fingers, and the threads entwined, weaving together until light no longer passed through, and a pitch black patch of fabric floated before them. Ruby stared in awe, her own essence flicking about beneath her own fingers. Blake laughed, dissolving the fabric back into its pure form once more. "I couldn't resist, but these are the steps we will practice tonight. First, close your eyes."

"My eyes?" Ruby nearly questioned. "Okay." She chose instead to trust her mentor's orders.

"Now, picture your essence floating before you." Blake instructed. Ruby did so, in her mind's eye it gleamed in invisible sunlight. "Now imagine it separating, dividing itself into many smaller portions, just as mine did." Ruby did so, easily, the image a near perfect recreation of Blake's demonstration. "Now, entwine them, again, just as you remember." The essence obeyed her command, morphing into several dozen gleaming ropes. "Now draw them out, longer and thinner, until you can scarcely see them" Once more the image changed. As the ropes thinned, so they extended, until the dozens of ropes became dozens of hair thin threads. Blake hummed. "And now for the hard part, weave them together, like a wicker mat, over and under, crossing over." Ruby struggled to recall the pattern...over and under, cross over, yes, she could see it now, the many tiny strings converging in an orderly fashion, over and under, cross over... "Now tighten, draw the threads close, see them bind to one another, stronger than before." The threads drew togethershrinking, forming, until a crimson replica of Blake's example existed, pictures in her mind. "Now open your eyes."

Ruby obeyed, then gasped, for the image she had seemingly imagined now floated before her, gleaming crimson in the firelight, Blake beaming with pride. "I-I did it!" Ruby exclaimed in shock. "How?"

Blake reached forth and plucked the cloth from mid air, examining it closely. "We are little more than our essence Ruby, our minds, our souls are but one, entwined. We are pure existence, and that is the basis of tonight's lesson. The most important thing to remember, is that anything you can see, you can do. You merely need to break down the barrier conjured between."

"Wow...did I do it well?" Ruby asked, watching Blake tug and fold the crimson cloth in various ways.

"You did perfectly Ruby." Blake admired, laying the swatch on the flood. She conjured a dagger, stabbed it into the cloth, and dragged it down. "Well, that's interesting." Holding the cloth once more, Ruby saw the split knitting itself back together, like her own skin. In mere seconds it looked brand new. "It seems to have inherited your physical properties. Glynda will be interested in studying this. Try again, but this time with your eyes open." Ruby sliced her skin again, repeating the steps once more. This time she watched as her essence split and formed, far faster this time, almost as fast as Blake's. The aspect of shadow grinned when another swatch hung in midair. "Now make it bigger."

Weiss awoke warm and hungry. It was a shock to her, how alien it felt, likely because she had not spent the prior day hooked up to an IV. It was different from usual hunger, no dull ache in her stomach, but a subtle feeling of fatigue, her mouth uncomfortably dry, and her attention drawn subconsciously to the cryo unit in the corner. She groaned, burying her face back in the warm mounds beneath her.

"Good morning to you too." Yang teased. Weiss did not have the energy to react, instead huffing into the warm flesh. "Are you okay Weiss?"
Weiss merely moaned as Yang's heated fingers ran through her hair, massaging circles into her scalp. It was criminal that she needed to move. "I need...blood." She mumbled hesitantly. She felt Yang nod and hum.

"You want me to get it for you?" Yang offered.

If Weiss had her way, she would never do anything again, just lie there, in the arms of a goddess for the rest of her days. Not a terrible way to go really. "No...no I need to do it myself." Weiss wanted to die.

"Okay then, do you want me-" Yang started.

Of course she did, Yang was her lifeline. "No." Weiss interrupted. "N-not yet. I don't want you to see." But she was a coward.

Yang did not seem to mind, humming in understanding. She turned them over, leaning over Weiss to plant a kiss on her forehead. Weiss felt everything burn. "I'll be right outside. Want me to make some coffee?"

She wanted Yang to make her warm again. "Please, and thank you." Weiss managed a smile, which Yang reflected tenfold before slipping out of the bed. Weiss watched her bare behind bounce as she made her way through the door, shooting a smirk over her shoulder before closing it. "You did that on purpose." Weiss half groaned to herself, curling up as a shudder went through her body. She wished she had the time to relieve herself, but she had another, far more serious urge to satiate, and latching onto distractions would be her undoing.

With a burst of energy, Weiss flung the covers off and pushed herself up and onto her feet, then immediately shivered as the cold hit her bare skin. Thankfully, among other things, Yang had fashioned her a robe of firesilk, which she plucked from its hook on her wardrobe, stepping into her slippers as she tied the warm fabric around her waist. It was nothing compared to Yang's skin, but even a shadow was enough to keep her comfortable.

Suitably warmed, Weiss made her way to the cryo unit, undoing its latch to reveal the blood packs within, all neatly labelled with a tag in Glynda's perfect - infuriatingly so - cursive. That one skill above all else had always eluded Weiss. She could not write nor read most of the beautiful scrawl, but Glynda's brand seemed a perfect blend, reasonable in both elegance and legibility.

Stop stalling Weiss. It's a fucking nametag...with Winter's name on it...oh gods this is morbid.

Plucking the blood pack from the unit, Weiss shut and latched it. She laid the pack on top, then opened the bottom drawer of her wardrobe, the chilled drawer hissing as it received fresh air for the first time in over a week, revealing several wine bottles and glasses. Weiss had converted this drawer into a hidden chiller with Port's assistance. It did not take much, some measurements, copper sheeting, rubber sealant, and a jury rigged cryo cell. Really, the only reasons chillers were so expensive were the build quality and export costs. And keeping the cryo crystals charged was a drop in the bucket, cryo energy being far easier to harvest and store than thermal energy. You could not make something too cold, it would only become brittle rather than exploding or bursting into flame. And if you were throwing cryo crystals around enough to break even a brittle one, you were a moron and liable to freeze yourself to death anyway. No, this was not advanced technology, just the greed of Atlas depriving the world of a valuable convenience. Cheaper models could easily be manufactured, but that would cut into the profits, so they did not bother.

Weiss plucked one of the glasses free and kicked the drawer shit, returning to her desk and setting it down. She grabbed the blood pack and sat at the desk, trying not to think about what was coming
as she pulled the cap off. The scent hit her, thick, metallic, and above all else, appealing. A disgusting shudder ran through her body, and she forcibly looked away, hands shaking as the crimson liquid filled the glass, glancing back only to ensure it did not overflow, and stopping as the liquid approached the brim.

"Ugh...I'm sorry Winter." Weiss whispered as she sealed the bag and placed it aside. This was it, Weiss thought, no more delays, no more excuses, just her, Weiss Schnee, a vampire, and a glass of blood, a wine glass, how fancy, how fitting for the Ice Queen of Atlas Academy. How far she had fallen. She stared down at the dark substance and wished, prayed that she would throw up, but no, the more she hovered, the more she smelled, the deeper she gazed, the more that alien part of her mind throbbed and thrashed, pleading, begging to be sustained.

As she gripped the stem of the glass, Weiss' eyes stung. Raising the edge to her trembling lips, the first tears began to fall.

Weiss slowly opened the door, and Yang climbed from within the fire to see the young vampire clutching the handle so tightly it crumpled. She turned to look at Yang, and she felt her figurative heartbreak as she witnessed the broken look on her face.

"Y-Yang?" Weiss pleaded.

Yang did not need to be asked, striding forward and meeting Weiss as she collapsed, sobbing into her arms, clutching her tightly, as Yang lovingly stroked her hair, shedding silent tears of her own. "I've got you Snowball. I've got you."
Pyrrha found Ruby tending Glynda's garden. It was one of the duties Ruby had volunteered to take on to lighten the load for Glynda and Pyrrha, and a task it seemed she quite enjoyed. "Almost done Ruby?"

"Yep, just…" Ruby pulled the spray bottle from her satchel and gave the garden one lasts soak.
"There. What's up?"

"I was just about go do some training." Pyrrha replied. She was dressed in her armor - bronze greaves, a skirt made from strips of leather and bronze, and leather for her torso and arms - with her shield and spear slung over her back. She carried a large camping backpack in hand. "I thought you might want to join me."

"Sure!" Ruby cheered. "I can gather herbs while you're exercising!"

"Actually, I was hoping you'd train with me." Pyrrha corrected.

"Oh, okay, sounds fun." Ruby agreed. "Do I need to take anything with me?"

"Just wear this." Pyrrha dropped the backpack at Ruby's feet. It sounded as if several wood blocks clunked together within. "It weighs about as much as my armor and weapons."

Ruby put her spray bottle in her satchel, then put the satchel in the backpack. She found what looked like wooden toy weapons inside. She slung the backpack over her shoulders. "It's not that heavy."

"Good." Pyrrha adjusted the pack's position on Ruby's back. "You'll want it to be comfortable. We've got a lot of running to do. Ready?"

"Yep!" Ruby chirped.

"Follow me." Pyrrha instructed. She began jogging toward the town, Ruby following and matching her pace. Pyrrha first followed a winding path through the town, then headed along one of the narrow dirt paths, taking them into the forest. The path twisted and narrowed, the sun increasingly blocked by the overhanging trees. A fallen tree blocked the path. Pyrrha leapt over it and Ruby did the same, both hardly breaking stride. A little farther on, the trees and brush began to thin, until the path opened into a clearing. Pyrrha came to a halt a few steps in, with Ruby standing at her side.

"Ooh, what is this place?" Ruby asked. The field was full of wooden and metal obstacles, almost like a playground for adults. Some fallen trees and branches encroached from the fringes, and most of the obstacles were in obvious disrepair.

"This is the old Huntsman training ground." Pyrrha explained. "Back when I was training to be a
Huntress, and when Port still had students before Winter came to the island, this is where we worked out. It hasn't been used much since, so it's fallen into disrepair, but there's enough still standing to make it useful."

"Awesome." Ruby admired.

"Now, are you ready for some real training?" Pyrrha asked.

"Let's do it!" Ruby enthused.

Pyrrha approached a rack of pull-up bars. One looked to be in good shape, but the others were rusted. "I'll clean one up for you." Pyrrha concentrated, whispering a magic spell and holding out her hand toward one of the bars. The rust flaked away, blowing away as dust, until the bar was clean and shiny. "There, let's see how strong you are." She could not help but notice that even after the jog to the training ground, Ruby was not sweating. Even she had worked up a bit of a sweat.

Pyrrha jumped up, grabbing one of the bars, and started doing pull-ups. After watching Pyrrha do a few, Ruby joined in beside her. After two dozen, Pyrrha dropped down, huffing and puffing as sweat streamed down her face. Ruby kept going, not even slowing down. "How long should I keep doing this?" Ruby asked.

"Keep going until you get tired." Pyrrha instructed, though she soon realized that was probably not wise. She kept counting Ruby's reps until she reached 100. "Okay, I think that's enough." Ruby dropped down, looking to Pyrrha for instruction. "How do you feel?"

"Fine." Ruby shrugged.

"Not fatigued?" Pyrrha pressed.

"Nope." Ruby shook her head.

"Well then...I guess I don't have to worry about training your endurance." Pyrrha thought aloud. "Okay, take off your backpack, put it down here." Ruby placed the backpack on the ground at Pyrrha's feet. Pyrrha unzipped it, searching around inside until she found a wooden dagger. "Now I'll teach you to defend yourself."

"Why?" Ruby asked.

"Because...because the world is dangerous." Pyrrha sighed.

"But nothing hurts me." Ruby noted.

"Nothing we tested." Pyrrha corrected. "We couldn't test everything, it would be too dangerous. There might be something out there that can do real harm to you, so it's best to be ready to defend yourself."

"I guess you're right." Ruby allowed.

"I think a dagger is the best weapon for you." Pyrrha explained. "It's light, fast, easily concealable." She walked over to a tree trunk at the edge of the clearing. Bits of bark were missing and gouges had been cut into it. "Watch me carefully. Pretend this tree is an attacker." Pyrrha lunged at the trunk, stabbing repeatedly, wood clunking against wood. She stepped back, reset, and attacked again, using different moves. "Stabbing is always going to be most effective. Only slash if there's no other option." Pyrrha stepped up to the trunk, almost touching it. "If the attacker gets too close, you can't always stab straight on." She jabbed the wooden dagger into the side of the trunk.
"There, now you try."

Ruby took the training dagger from Pyrrha and stepped up to the tree trunk. With a series of quick strikes, she matched Pyrrha's demonstration exactly, then repeated it again. "Did I do it right?"

"That was perfect." Pyrrha declared with a hint of shock in her voice. "It usually takes hours of practice, if not days...you're incredible."

"Thanks!" Ruby beamed.

"Maybe we should move on to something more complicated." Pyrrha suggested. "Fortunately I brought the rest of the training gear." She returned to the backpack, pulling a pair of small wooden shields and spears from within. The spears were only about two thirds the length of Pyrrha's, and the shields were barely more than a foot in diameter. They were weighted to be heavier than real weapons, ideal for training. She laid her proper weapons on the ground beside the backpack. "Let me demonstrate a little."

Pyrrha showed Ruby the basics of fighting with a spear and shield, then it was time to spar. When the pair faced off, Pyrrha was effectively fighting herself. Ruby matched every attack and block, and even when Pyrrha threw in some complex maneuvers, Ruby was still able to hold her own. It remained a draw for a long while, until Pyrrha began to get fatigued. Ruby had no such trouble and began to dominate the matchup. Perhaps Pyrrha and Weiss' concerns about Ruby's safety were a tad unfounded.

"That was incredible Ruby." Pyrrha praised as the pair sat on a fallen tree in the shade at the edge of the clearing. Pyrrha had thought to throw a few bottles of water into the backpack before heading out, and she quickly downed them. Ruby appeared to require no such sustenance. "You're something really special. Training to fight like that...it takes years, and you learned in minutes."

"I just did what you showed me." Ruby shrugged.

"I know, and that's part of what's so amazing." Pyrrha nodded. "Just copying someone else's movements sounds simple enough, but being able to do it that fast, in the context of a fight, with all that unpredictability, it's unbelievable."

"How goes your training?" Blake asked, emerging from the forest nearby. She was not entirely in human form, floating a few inches above the ground and passing through the brush without disturbing it.

"Fantastic." Pyrrha answered. "Ruby's a wonderful student. She's already as good as I am, if not better."

"That does not surprise me." Blake shrugged. She took on a fully solid form, standing before the pair. "Her mind's like a sponge, and her control over her essence is excellent."

Pyrrha stood a stretched. "There's just one more lesson I want to teach her."

"That's why I'm here?" Blake suggested.

"Yes, this demonstration requires a live sparring partner." Pyrrha confirmed. "Sometimes you won't have a weapon. In those situations, you need to be able to neutralize your opponent, even if they're bigger and stronger. Just punching and kicking won't do the job. You need to get them to the ground, to give yourself an advantage."

"Alright, kick my ass." Blake smirked, standing in an open spot in the field.
Pyrrha approached Blake, hands up and ready. "Come at me." Blake threw a punch at Pyrrha. Pyrrha slipped out of the way, grabbed Blake's arm, and with a tug and a shift of her hips, flipped Blake over, slamming her down onto her back. Pyrrha then dropped a knee onto Blake's chest before punching her in the throat. Pyrrha stood and turned to Ruby. "Like that."

Blake stood as well, unharmed. "You hit like a sprite."

Pyrrha rolled her eyes. "Now, there are a few more techniques you should learn." Pyrrha demonstrated several more blocks, dodges and grapples on Blake, each ending with a devastating attack on her grounded opponent. Blake did not seem injured or tired, just a bit bored, as usual. Finally Pyrrha had run through all the moves she could think of, and turned to Ruby. "That's it. It's time for you to try."

Ruby stood and approached Blake. "No, not me, you're wrestling her." Blake instructed, gesturing toward Pyrrha. "Let's see who's better, student or teacher."

"I think I already know, but yes, let's see." Pyrrha smiled. "Um...no attacks once one of us is down. We don't want to actually hurt each other."

"You mean you don't want her to actually hurt you." Blake teased.

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean." Pyrrha shot back. "Ready?"

"Ready!" Ruby announced.

"Alright, go!" Blake shouted.

Pyrrha and Ruby locked together in a standing grapple, struggling for leverage and positioning. Ruby was strong, very strong. Still Pyrrha was able to hold her own. "Always watch out for the cheap shot." Pyrrha warned. She slipped her leg behind Ruby's and tripped her. Ruby stood and dusted herself off. The pair clinched again, now not just struggling for position, but exchanging the occasional trip attempt. It was a stalemate, but one Ruby was slowly breaking. Pyrrha's muscles burned with exhaustion, and her stomach rumbled with hunger. Finally her strength gave way and she found herself on her back.

"I did it!" Ruby cheered.

"Again." Pyrrha stood and reengaged. This time Ruby's victory came much more quickly. Her exhaustion and Ruby's seemingly limitless endurance made the latter's victories easier and easier as they went on.

"I'm calling it." Blake declared. "Ruby wins."

"I agree." Pyrrha gasped, lying on her back. She struggled to her feet, hunched over and panting. "I'm spent." She took a deep breath and straightened her posture. "Everything hurts."

"Ooh, I think I can help!" Ruby chirped. She rushed to Pyrrha and wrapped her in a tight embrace, much to Pyrrha's shock.

"Wha-what are you doing?" Pyrrha stammered.

Ruby concentrated, squeezing Pyrrha. The pair began to subtly glow, and for a few moments, Pyrrha felt as though she was floating. Then Ruby released her and stepped back, smiling at her. "Better?"
The burn in Pyrrha's muscles was gone. Suddenly, she felt as though she could run a marathon...but for the rumbling in her empty stomach. "I feel...fantastic. How...how did you do that?"

"Well, the book I read said that your muscles hurting is because of lactic acid and damage caused by exertion." Ruby explained. "It's kind of like any other wound, so I healed you."

"Healed me how?" Pyrrha asked.

"The way I heal myself after a cut." Ruby replied. "I just focused really hard on fixing what was broken, except in your muscles instead of my skin."

"That's astonishing Ruby...I've never...even the healing spells Glynda taught me aren't this good." Pyrrha praised. "You're amazing, absolutely amazing." Ruby beamed. "Now, let's head home. I'm starving."

"Can I have cookies?" Ruby requested.

"Sure, you've earned it." Pyrrha agreed.

"Sweet!" Ruby cheered.

"Blake, can you carry our gear back?" Pyrrha asked.

"Sure." Blake nodded. She once again took on a more ethereal form, gathering up the backpack, training weapons, and Pyrrha's real weapons.

"Today was incredible." Pyrrha gushed. "I never could have imagined you would do so great so fast."

Ruby smiled ear to ear.

A knock on the door distracted Weiss from her work, and she sighed, setting down her pen. Her office had taken some time to get back in order. Winter, bless her orderly heart, had unintentionally thrown everything about in her cleaning. Yang claimed that she had only wiped down the desks and straightened things, and Weiss believed her. This was typical Winter, coming into her room while she was gone and going over things once more. No matter how many times Weiss scolded her for it, her organized chaos just bothered Winter on a fundamental level.

Weiss had hoped that living separately would prevent her habit from plaguing her, but no, something had to give, it always did. Now things were back to the way she preferred, with her most used instruments and resources roughly positioned in and around her workspace, Glynda's book on a stand by her left, a notebook in front, and loose pages to her right, many of which had little notes already. Her new project was already taking shape, but first…

"Yang?" Weiss called out.

"I'll get it." Yang answered from the living room. A whoosh of flames followed, then the thud of Yang's bare footsteps as she strode to the door. "It's Ruby and Blake!" Of course it was. They had been expecting Ruby to visit, Weiss in particular. After the stressful morning they both craved the young aspect's cheerful presence.

"Weiss!" Ruby yelled as she jogged into the room, and Weiss happily turned to welcome her into an embrace.
"Ruby, good afternoon." Weiss greeted, nuzzling into Ruby's shoulder, drinking in her scent, a mixed floral aroma she had sorely missed. "How goes your day?"

Ruby loosened her grasp. "Pyrrha took me on her fitness routine! We ran through the forest and tested our muscles, and she taught me how to fight!" Ruby gushed gleefully.

Weiss felt a pang of relief. So Pyrrha had taken her advice, good, good… "And how did you fare?" Weiss chuckled.

Ruby pulled back and drew her blade, now sheathed by her side instead of stuffed in her bag, twirling it about her fingers effortlessly. "I won! Pyrrha says I'm a really fast learner and that I have great stamina." She held the dagger in an icepick grip, dropping into a low crouch, a playful but confident smirk on her face. Weiss was impressed by Ruby's form.

"Ruby outlasted Pyrrha, effortlessly." Blake chimed in from the doorway, she and Yang leaning on either side.

"It wasn't effortless, Pyrrha really tried!" Ruby corrected. "I just...didn't feel tired, so I kept going, and when Pyrrha couldn't, I tried to give her some of my energy, and it worked!"

"You what?" Weiss balked.

"I thought, hey, I can heal myself easily, and Pyrrha and I have the same blood, maybe I can help." Ruby explained. "The biology book I read said that the pain is just lactic acid eating away at the muscle, and they heal back stronger right? So I hugged her, and did the imagination thing Blake taught me, and it worked!"

"Imagination thing?" Weiss questioned.

"Oh yeah, right, look!" Ruby sliced open her finger, drawing forth her essence, and Weiss found herself hit with a much heavier floral scent, yet oddly, did not feel the need to feed, watching mesmerized as the blood flickered and transformed. "Blake taught me to make cloth!" The essence turned into a crimson swatch, which then attached itself to Ruby's hand, growing like moss across her pale skin until it completely covered to her wrist. She then pulled it off, holding it up like a prize towards Yang, then Weiss. "It's so awesome!"

Weiss took the freshly formed garment and resisted the urge to bury her face in it. The floral scent hung heavy on the cloth, which felt smoother than silk, a deep rich crimson in color. Not a seam could be seen, and when Weiss held it beneath a nearby magnifying glass the weaving was impeccable. "This is beautiful Ruby, you're doing well." She admired, offering the glove back, only to find another in her face.

"They regenerate, and store and conduct energy, and probably more." Ruby noted. "Glynda is still running tests. Maybe you can find a use for them?"

Ruby looked so excited, so hopeful, it made Weiss all the more grateful she had accepted the aspect's friendship. "Thank you Ruby, I will treasure them always." Weiss took the other glove, trying them on. They fit...like...well, what they were, snug without being tight, and warm, they were… "Perfect, flawless Ruby. You taught her well Blake."

"Of course I did." Blake casually preened, oozing pride.

"What are you working on?" Ruby asked. "Can we help?"

Weiss turned to find Ruby looking over her work. "With the writing, not really, but I do have some
errands you can run in town, if you'd be so kind." Weiss moved aside several pages of notes before handing one to Ruby.

Ruby looked over the page curiously. "The Huntsman's Guide to Civilian Safety?" Ruby read aloud. The page seemed to be a mock-up of a book cover, currently quite bare, with naught but a simple border, and the title written in bold letters.

"You could also help with that." Weiss noted. "The border needs embellishment, and the cover art will need brainstorming. Perhaps a vampire and a werewolf facing each other down?"

"You're writing a guide for the people?" Blake asked, appearing on Weiss' flank, alongside Yang, who lay a warm hand upon her shoulder.

"I am." Weiss confirmed. "Witches, Huntsman and Templars are all the people rely on to protect themselves. Whenever something dangerous crops up they come running to us, but so often it's far too late by then. Imagine how many lives could be saved by teaching people basic lessons about supernatural beings." She had a fair point. The general populous were relatively ignorant. The Templar Order claimed it was to avoid inciting panic, but in Weiss' opinion, it was to keep their rule secure. If the people ran scared to them at every bump in the night, they would be less likely to reject their more...stifling regulations. "Simple lessons make all the difference, like...like wearing a ring of silver to shake hands with strangers. A vampire would flinch. Or that werewolves aren't natural cannibals, and will leave well enough alone, and may even protect a village from Grimm if reasoned with. The world could be such a safer place if only someone made an effort. And I intend to."

"You shoulda' told me Weiss." Yang said. "I've got loads of knowledge to share."

"Likewise, Nora and Ren would be willing to speak as well." Blake added. "Ren in particular. Nora...might be a bit much for you."

"Ah yes, the Huntsmen...one of which had a taste for my kind if I remember correctly...did you know werewolf bites cause necrosis in vampire flesh?" Weiss shuddered. "Fun fact."

"Nora won't bite." Yang scoffed. "She's got Ren to reel her in. I hunted with them a bit. They're really nice."

Weiss sighed, rubbing the bridge of her nose and nodding. "Okay, perhaps you could seek them out tomorrow."

"They were at the Templar camp when I visited." Ruby noted. "Maybe they're still there? I can stop and see after I run your errands."

"Right, errands." Weiss refocused. "Yes, thank you Ruby, I would appreciate that, follow me." Picking up a piece of paper, her pen and inkwell, Weiss stood, striding from her office into the living room, and crossing to the table where the box of silverware still sat. "This is all the nonessential silver from my home." She explained, laying down her supplies to write. "I'd like you to take them to Port with this commission list." She handed the note to Ruby, who scanned it. A silver dagger made to Velvet's specifications, with the rest to be used to coat as many stiletto daggers as reasonably possible.

"Oh, Velvet is making me a cloak." Ruby observed. "I could ask her myself when I visit." She offered. Weiss hummed, moving to the doorway curtain. Her own cloak hung on a hook, the silver broach gleaming in the firelight. Holding up her hand, she flexed it. Ruby was not burned by silver...maybe...
"Weiss?" Yang's worried voice sounded.

"It's fine." Weiss smirked, turning around, broach in hand. Ruby's glove had protected her. "Ask Port to cast an iron broach for me, and this, I gift to you." She offered the silver object to Ruby. "He can inscribe your initials instead of mine."

"Ruby doesn't have a last name." Blake pointed out.

"Of course she does." Weiss scoffed. "She's Ruby Nikos."
“Yeah, we've had a lot of misunderstandings with people.”

If there was one luxury Weiss was thankful Patch enjoyed, it was plumbing. She could go without the gourmet food, the high fashion and the constant presence of magitech. The town produced amazing baked goods, Velvet was worth ten Atlesian tailors in attitude alone, and anything Weiss really needed she could either fashion herself or with Port or Glynda's help. But plumbing was one thing Weiss could never live comfortably without, and it was a godsend the island put the effort in.

Weiss was also quite fortunate this property existed, formerly the home of a reclusive widow, a Huntsman's wife. The widow had built the home with her own two hands and lived out the rest of her days hunting game and gathering herbs for sale in town. One day she simply went into the forest and never returned. They never found her body, something which always irked Weiss, that such a long story could come to such a sad, inconclusive end. She wondered if she would end up like that, just gone with the wind without a word, all her friends and family passed, naught but confused villagers to stumble upon her dusty belongings...it was depressing to say the least. She would rather die that just fade away.

Still, for the time being she had company, and was expecting more, and thanks to the luxuries afforded by plumbing, Weiss enjoyed a hot morning bath before readying herself for the day. Unfortunately Yang refused to join her. Water, natural water, did not harm Yang, but she hated being wet all the same. So she instead left Weiss with a peck on the nose and a promise to brew fresh coffee. Their relationship...existed. And that Yang did not press the matter left Weiss relieved.

Throughout the day Weiss would receive periodic attention - a hug here, a conversation there, pecks on the cheeks, forehead and nose, once on the neck that left Weiss shivering, and not from any cold to be sure. Yang was her constant, her source of morale, distracting her from the harsh reality that now tugged at her being. With every slow beat of her heart she swore her humanity slipped yet another ounce, but at night, safely held in warm arms, Weiss felt just a little more whole. And that was worth the world to her.

"Weiss, the guests are here!” Yang sing-songed through the door.

Weiss must have been dozing...curse these dreaded guests, and their interrupting her peace with their...their dog smell and gangrenous mouths...ugh. For the greater good Weiss recited, hauling herself from the heavenly water, pulling the plug as she did so. Conveniently, the bathroom had a door both to the hallway and her bedroom, so she hardly needed to wrap a towel about herself but for the cold, and once she entered the next room that too ceased to be an issue, as she was met with the smiling form of Yang with a freshly warmed towel held in hand.

"Come here Snowball." Yang cooed as Weiss walked into her arms, allowing Yang to wrap the cloth around her.
"Hmm, do try not to melt me." Weiss mumbled as waves of heat buffeted her form, the water evaporating under the careful ministrations of her companion.

"You're too stubborn to melt under a little heat." Yang chuckled, running her fingers through Weiss' hair, gently undoing any knots that remained.

"So you say...and yet here we are." Weiss murmured into Yang's shoulder. How she adored the feeling of fingers in her hair, one of the few remaining memories of her mother was such a thing, dozing on her chest, listening to the sound of her voice...she could just barely remember it. She would have forgotten her face were it not for the portrait she had taken with her.

"You feeling okay?" Yang asked.

Weiss sighed, nodding. "I'll be out soon."

"Let me help." Yang offered.

Weiss looked up, quirking her brow. "I am capable of dressing myself Yang."

"Never said you weren't." Yang grinned.

Weiss gasped, panic gripping her heart as a sudden heat wrapped around her pelvis. "Yang, Yang stop!" Weiss hissed, digging her nails harshly into Yang's flesh as the heat died down to a dull warmth and she became aware of Yang's hands rubbing circles into her back.

"Sorry, sorry Snowball, it's okay, you're alright, I didn't do anything big, just..." Yang whispered apologies, faltering as she felt Weiss trembling in her arms, gulping deep breaths as she struggled to calm down.

"It's okay, I know, it's not your fault, it's mine, I just..." Weiss heaved a shuddering sigh. "I got...spooked. It's okay what...oh." Weiss finally looked down, only to find herself clad in shimmering lace undergarments, which warmed her like other items Yang had fashioned for her. "You made me...a muff warmer." Weiss snorted.

"Do you like them?" Yang asked, hesitantly raising a hand to brush a stray lock behind Weiss' ear. "I tried making them like your others."

Weiss took another deep breath, taking Yang's hand before it fell and nuzzling into its warmth. "I love them." She whispered, planting a kiss on Yang's palm. "Just warn me next time, please?"

"I will, promise." Yang beamed, allowing Weiss to push her toward the door.

"Go entertain our guests." Weiss instructed.

"Sure you don't want a bra too?" Yang smirked. She received a towel to the face for her trouble.

"Oh wow, you really smell just like her!" Weiss found herself blindsided by a ginger haired girl as she exited her room. Her smell was oddly sweet, but still, displeasing to her nose. She seemed innocent, almost like Ruby, but taller, thick with muscle, and barely clothed in a white smock and pink skirt...what?

"Nora." A quiet but firm voice tiredly roused from one of the nearby couches. Weiss' gaze was drawn to a far more reasonably dressed Mistrali man, seated next to Blake, who seemed amused by the situation. Yang lay on the couch opposite, offering a casual wave.
"Oh, right, Nora Valkyrie at your disposal!" The ginger offered her hand, and Weiss took it after a brief hesitation.

"Charmed." Weiss managed, shaking it twice.

Nora grinned toothily. "It's great to see you all not dying and stuff. Oh and Ren says I should say sorry for not being all dolled up, I ran here so I was in the buff until Ren got here with my clothes."

"Oh, that's quite alright, I've uh, I've never really thought about how werewolves handle clothing, so this is good to know. I need to fetch my notebook, one moment." Weiss shot a smile at the other werewolf before heading through the office door, hastily gathering a notebook, pen and inkwell.

Weiss shuddered, catching the scent wafting through along with Nora's voice chittering away. It was just...alien. She did not like it, she did not want it near her, she wanted it gone as soon as possible...but she had questions to ask, so for now she would bear it. A welcome scent became evident, Ruby's gloves, neatly placed upon Glynda's book. Snatching them up, Weiss held them to her nose, breathing their floral aroma deeply. It was like heaven, sending a pleasurable shudder through her being...this was weird, she was being weird. She dropped the gloves and hurried from the room.

"So, I apologize for not meeting you sooner." Weiss continued. "I have you to thank for saving my life after all." She shooed Yang's legs off the couch, only for them to lay over her lap. Yang was lucky they were warm. "Had you not arrived, I would not have been saved, and everyone I care for would have been devastated. Thank you for saving me, and avoiding that pain."

"I do wish we had arrived sooner." Ren expressed.

"She nearly lost us a few times, her scent kept cropping up and fizzling out." Nora explained, scowling. "And...we stopped to pay our respects to one of her victims." Her fists clenched, her expression tightening. "But we kept going, and now she has nowhere to go. We'll find her Weiss, I promise. I'll try and bring you back her head." Nora's face turned into a feral grin, and Weiss had to look away to avoid focusing on her teeth, enlarged canines and incisors gleaming in the firelight.

"That won't be necessary, but I thank you all the same." Weiss managed, shooting them both a look, plastering on her best polite smile and trying her damndest not to wrinkle her nose at the smell.

"You wanted to ask us some questions, correct?" Ren thankfully refocused.

"Ooh right, you wanna' hear about our adventures right?" Nora gushed. "We've been hunting all sorts of beasties for years!"

"At some point yes, I am writing a guide for the civilian populace on various supernatural creatures that inhabit the lands." Weiss explained, opening her notebook and laying it on Yang's leg. "I seek to inform the world of the unknown realities many are so ignorant of, what they should and should not fear, how they can remain safe when encountering potential threats, and most importantly, what is not a threat, and why."

"A noble cause, I approve." Ren praised.

"Yeah, we've had a lot of misunderstandings with people." Nora added.

"Though not always due to our nature." Ren noted.

"Yeah." Nora chuckled. "Sometimes I just rub people the wrong way by accident."
"But there have been times when just a few small facts would have alleviated many fears." Ren said.

"Yeah, like, we don't eat humans, unless it's by accident, we do attack with our teeth sometimes." Nora looked notably ill. "It's just wrong, we're humans, we just eat meat more than we used to."

"And nuts and berries." Ren added.

"Not chocolate though." Nora pouted. "It smells so good and I haven't had any since I was a kid…"

"You were not born werewolves?" Weiss asked, pausing in her scribbling to meet Ren's eye as he shook his head.

"Our village was attacked when we were young." Nora said. "I think I was seven, Ren was nine, right?" She looked to Ren, who nodded. "The important thing is, werewolves try to stay away from humans. We don't have any safe havens from the Templars like the vampires do. If we pose any threat we get hunted down. So a pack attacking just isn't common, there's almost no point." Nora's hand reach for Ren's, and he quickly clasped it in both his own. "But the huntsmen in our town killed their Alpha's mate, and they wanted justice, so they attacked, killed the adults, but kept the children. We were innocent in their eyes, so they turned us instead. Ren tried to hold them off, but he was just a kid, we both were, they took him, and they took me, and gave us these." Nora pushed off the shoulder of her smock, revealing several puncture scars. "We didn't know what to do after, we were so scared. Ren had just lost his parents, so we just did what they told us to do. And then the Templars found them."

"I took Nora and ran in the chaos." Ren picked up the story. "Between the Templars, werewolves and silvers smoke, no one noticed us. We didn't stop running until we couldn't go any further." He laughed. "I remember thinking, what now? I didn't know what I was doing. I was alive, Nora was alive, but I only had some lessons from my father to survive with. How long could we survive on our own?"

"And then a miracle happened." Nora beamed, wiping a tear from her eye. "The spriggans found us, and took us in."

Weiss, Yang and Blake all reacted to that. "The nature spirits saved you?" Blake asked.

"Oh, I love those girls!" Yang exclaimed.

"Fascinating, I'd heard tales of spriggans helping lost souls, but never had a first hand account." Weiss scribbled even more furiously, dipping her pen in the inkwell.

"We were very fortunate." Ren expressed.

"They were so awesome, they took us to their home, brought us food, healed our bumps and scrapes, a-and…" Nora sniffed, wiping her eyes. "When the full moon rose, and we turned for the first time, they calmed us down, taught us to hunt. We would have been scared out of our minds otherwise, but it was so fun. I felt so amazing, so strong and fast, running about the forest, chasing deer and rabbits…" Nora laughed, snuggling closer to Ren. "But yeah, we weren't born werewolves. But I consider myself more spriggan than anything. I don't remember my human family, the werewolves are dead, Renny's my only other family and that's cuz' he's my mate, so as far as I'm concerned the spriggans were my mamas and Ozpin's like our daddy."

"You're mates?" Weiss questioned. "Ozpin?"

"Unofficially." Ren explained. "We haven't found the right place to settle, and we have work to do
"He keeps saying no and having us drink all these yucky potions, but the spriggans taught me to propagate, so one day." Nora nuzzled Ren's neck, planting a loud kiss and giggling. Ren smiled warmly. "Do you like puppies Weiss?"

"I...I do." Weiss replied. Ever since she was a child she had wanted one, but no, no pets in the manor. Only the guard dogs that Weiss was not allowed to pet.

"Well, someday I'm gonna' have a whole litter, you could come visit!" Nora looked so excited, but all Weiss could think about were tiny little deadly mouths snapping at her precious, valuable fingers.

"A-anyway, thank you for being so open with me," Weiss managed. "Your story is fascinating. And if you don't mind, I will use you as examples in my writing, of friendly werewolves, the likes of which people might hope to meet. Is there anything you'd like to add? Advice for townspeople when they come across one or more of your kind?"

"Please refrain from throwing pitchforks at us?" Ren stated with a grimace, tapping his side.

"And fire, fire really hurts." Nora pouted, shifting around to move her smock, revealing her back had a severe burn down its left side. Yang flinched.

"Our kind will leave humans alone so long as we are not threatened." Ren noted. "If livestock are going missing, it is out of desperation. Reach out, our kind are reasonable. We once encountered a town that had formed a partnership with a pack, in exchange for protection, pelts and herbs, they could mingle with the people, and no longer fear the Templars' wrath."

"They were nice people, once they stopped snarling at us." Nora added. "They thought we were gonna' hurt people. But once it all got sorted, I got to play with their pups!"

"Perhaps in the future towns may do so freely." Weiss suggested. "Thank you for telling me. Even the knowledge that it's possible could help save a lot of lives."

"Oh, oh and werewolves love mead." Nora giggled.

Ren rolled his eyes. "Nora no."

"Daddy's home." Mercury jeered as he strode into the cave. "Catch." He threw his bag at Emerald, who grunted at its weight.

"Asshole." Emerald growled.

"Master!" Dew yelled with joy, scrambling to her feet but staying in place, hands clasped, trembling like an excited puppy.

"Go lie down girl, I'll be over in a moment." Mercury ordered, none too harshly. He was in the mood for some fun.

"Pathetic." Emerald scowled.

"Oh, we're doing this again." Mercury chuckled, much to Emerald's displeasure.

"She's barely more than a child at this point, it's sickening." Emerald spat. "Push her mind any further and she'll be a vegetable."
"It's her own fault for fighting it." Mercury shrugged. "The good ones snap like a twig, nice and docile."

"They should be so lucky." Emerald mumbled, emptying the bag of its contents, grey plastic packages with black printing. "Ugh, this garbage again." She wrinkled her nose.

"Well excuse me for not wanting your fine dining staining my clothes." Mercury scoffed. "Knowing Cinder she'll probably bring back a deer for you, and you can cook the for the girl."

"Her name is Dew, and this stuff isn't designed for long term sustenance, but why would you care, she's just your pet." Emerald ranted. "Feed her whatever garbage you want because you're just going to throw her away, if you let her live at all."

"Pfft, spoiled bitch." Mercury shot back. "You're so far up yourself because you're Cinder's favorite. You really think she treats all of your kind so special. She's hunting fo-"

"Shut up!" Emerald stood, stalking up to Mercury. "You don't know her like I do! You're just a hanger on. I grew up with Cinder. I served her. She chose me because I earned her respect, and I won't be talked down to by some-"

Emerald was cut off by an ice cold hand grasping her throat like a vice. "By some what?" Mercury growled. "Huh? Hard to talk when you're being put in your place, isn't it?"

"Sc-rew you." Emerald choked, not even attempting to struggle. "You don't have the guts."

"Wanna' bet?" Mercury challenged. "I could snap you like a twig. You think Cinder would really shed tears over you? She wouldn't waste the blood."

"You're...w-wrong..." Emerald barely managed. "She...loves...ee…"

"That is enough." Cinder's voice hissed through the cave. Emerald found herself on the ground, clutching her throat as she choked, gasping for breath. "Mercury, you are here to protect Emerald, not assault her."

"She keeps pushing me, I'm putting her in her place-" Mercury started.

"Her place!" Mercury flinched at Cinder's raised voice. "Is safety. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yeah, whatever." Mercury grumbled.

Kneeling down, Cinder cupped Emerald's face, drawing her gaze upward. "M-mistress-" Emerald managed.

"Shh don't speak." Cinder ordered, brushing Emerald's hand away to inspect her throat, already bruising. She scowled, moving to tangle her fingers in Emerald's hair. Emerald whimpered. "You will stop provoking him." Cinder glared at her servant.

Emerald nodded shakily, wincing at the agitation of her neck. "I'm sorry mistress." She whispered frantically.

Cinder's expression softened. "Go tend to Dew, Mercury." Cinder calmly instructed, the sound of heavy footfalls signalling his obedience. When he was out of sight, Cinder sighed. "Emerald."

"I'm sorry." Emerald apologized.

"Don't be sorry, be safe." Cinder snapped, shifting Emerald gently into her lap.
"He...she's right there, in front of me, and he treats her like a toy, and it scares me." Emerald gulped, tears welling in her eyes. "I keep seeing myself in her shoes."

"I will never let that happen to you Emerald." Cinder declared.

"I know, I know but...I'm just...I'm scared Cinder." Emerald continued. "I know you need to do this but...I miss home, I miss your bed, I miss being alone with you." She sniffed, reaching up to stroke Cinder's cheek. "I'll follow you to the ends of the world, but I don't know if I'm strong enough. What if I break, what if something comes that Mercury can't protect me from, what if you need help and he can't do it alone?"

"It won't come to that." Cinder assured her.

"But-" Emerald started.

Cinder cut her off with a finger to the lips, shushing her gently. "Have faith Emerald. Just...one more hunt, one more, and even if they are not the right one, I promise you." Cinder leaned down, brushing Emerald's ear with a kiss. "We will go home, I will give you what you seek, and we can be together, forever."

Emerald half laughed, half sobbed, reaching to wrap her arms around Cinder's neck. "Forever?"

"Forever."
Chapter Summary

"It is rude to stare."

After Ren and Nora's visit, Weiss seemed notably drained. Yang had heard werewolf scents were repulsive to vampires - even if humans could not perceive them - but the way Weiss hurried to bring out the scented candles still amused Yang. At least until Weiss stumbled, pulling out the pair of gloves Ruby had made her and holding them to her mouth, gulping air as if she had been suffocating. Yang took over from there, Weiss retreating to her office and continuing her work deep into the night. When Yang noticed Weiss' head drooping, she carried her to bed. Yang received no protest, the vampire curling into her embrace with a mumble.

Now Yang lie in bed, awake, but relaxed, the cool form of Weiss Schnee lying upon her chest, as was their comfortable routine. She could sense the morning sun. Normally Weiss would be awake by now, but it seemed today she would be sleeping in. Yang saw no issue with this, it gave her more time to admire Weiss, the soft texture of her skin, her flowing ivory hair, the feel of her lips against the swell of her breast. Through her presence, Weiss ignited a fire within the likes of which Yang had never truly encountered before. It flickered and crackled, small and precious, dwarfed by the anger and passion that so ruled her being, yet no less powerful for it. Yang liked to think Weiss could hear it, a private little beacon, guiding her towards pleasant dreams.

A gentle tapping on the bedroom door drew her attention, and Yang sighed. So much for Weiss watching. With as much care as possible, Yang turned herself over until Weiss lie on her back. The vampire whimpered but did not wake. Yang hated how pitiful Weiss sounded, like a wounded animal. It sent a pang of worry through her being, but still, she pulled herself away, reaching the door and slowly opening it.

"Hello Yang oh..." Pyrrha greeted, blushing and looking away as she noted Yang's physical state.

"It's okay, don't be shy, I won't tell Ruby." Yang teased.

Pyrrha huffed. "I hope I am not interrupting, normally Weiss is awake by now."

"She's sleeping in." Yang explained. "Did you need her for something?"

"No, actually, I wanted to ask for your help." Pyrrha managed to meet Yang's gaze, though with no shortage of red tinting her features. "Ruby and I are restoring our training ground, and it would go a lot smoother with someone stronger. Not to mention someone who can weld with a touch."

"If Weiss doesn't need me, sure." Yang smiled, shutting the door again. Turning back she saw that Weiss had reached a hand over where they had been lying before, a distressed expression on her still sleeping face. She climbed back onto the bed and cupped her face. "Weiss? Snowball, wakey wakey, please?" A groan was the only response, and Weiss' eyes cracked open. Yang smiled. "Pyrrha and Ruby would like my help, but if you want me to stay and snuggle, I don't mind making them wait."
Weiss nodded, drawing in a slow breath. "Hmm...have fun..." She breathed, lips quirking.

Yang leaned in, planting a lingering kiss on Weiss' nose. "Sleep well Snowball." She crooned, receiving another soft groan. She caressed Weiss' cheek a little longer before pulling away, ensuring the bed sheets were covering her fully, and leaving the room. Pyrrha looked away again, and Yang finally decided to summon some clothing. "Come on Pyrrha, nothing you haven't seen before."

"It is rude to stare." Pyrrha's blush was renewed.

Yang only laughed.

While Pyrrha was away, Ruby came out to play. Glynda's garden was both a sight to behold, and yet oddly sad. So much variety of nature, in such orderly patterns. Even Weiss' wasn't as structured, grouped together in reasonable clumps that had the implication of order, without the stifling rigidity. Still, Ruby loved the garden, tending it dutifully with her diluted blood, pulling free the weeds threatening to strangle its precious life. A part of her found that unfair. The weeds were merely existing where their seeds had fallen. Anywhere else and they would be free to grow unharmed. So Ruby buried them, outside the yard of course, with a healthy spray of her blood to boot. She did so in the same area each time, and today was no different.

Except something most certainly was.

The tangle of weeds that had been growing from her burials were moving. Today was neither a windy day, nor would the wind affect them in such a way. They were clearly...following Ruby, reaching out with their tendrils. She waved her hand, and they tracked it side to side. "Whoa..."

"Ruby?" Pyrrha called out, anxiety clouding her voice. "Ruby, where are you?" Ruby was not in the house, neither Glynda nor Blake had seen her, and the garden was unoccupied. Ruby had said she would be in the garden. Why would she lie?

"Ruby!" Yang's voice boomed, startling Pyrrha.

"I'm over here, come see!" Ruby's voice echoed from the distance. Pyrrha exchanged a perplexed look with Yang, who shrugged, heading off in the direction of the voice, a short way into the forest. Pushing through some vines, they entered a clearing, and were taken off guard by the sight before them. "I think I made life!" Ruby gushed, waving her hands before the mass of writing vines.

"Oh my gods." Pyrrha gasped.

Yang just laughed. "Way to go Ruby!" She cheered.

"How did you do this?" Pyrrha questioned.

"I've been burying weeds over here, and feeding them my blood, and today they started following me." Ruby explained. "So I tried moving them like with my blood, and it worked!"

"Those are big weeds Ruby." Yang admired. Indeed, they barely resembled weeds at all anymore. "They must have been growing deep into the ground at an accelerated rate." Pyrrha suggested.

"Maybe they'll grow even more from here...oh look at this!" Ruby suddenly leapt into the mass.
Pyrrha instinctively jittered forward, only for Ruby to be suspended by the vines, which moved to cup her body, writhing and forming until she sat upon them like an ordinary armchair.

"Lookin' good Rubes." Yang chuckled.

"This is so awesome!" Ruby squealed, bouncing in place. "Maybe I can make a house out of it."

"Small goals Ruby, don't push yourself too far too fast." Pyrrha warned.

"Let her dream." Yang advised. "The only way we grow is pushing our limits."

"I suppose you would know better than I." Pyrrha allowed. "Either way, we have a long day ahead of us. Ruby?"

"Coming!" Ruby responded. The vines lowered her gently to the ground, and she gave them a loving pet before walking away. "How was Weiss? Did she like Ren and Nora?"

"She's sleeping in." Yang replied. "She worked herself hard. Nora scared her, then made her sad, then worried her. It was an emotional rollercoaster."

"But Nora's harmless." Ruby said, confused.

"Not around vampires." Yang corrected.

The day did indeed turn out to be a long one, and Yang loved every second of it. The prior two days had been spent by Ruby and Pyrrha cleaning up the area, evaluating the damage and repairing what could be salvaged. The frequent storms that plagued the island had rendered much of the equipment a loss, the many wooden posts that made the various obstacles and equipment were either severely damaged or rotted out. Even those still standing strong were best to be replaced. Yang's job was to move everything around while Ruby and Pyrrha did the detail work.

Ruby mixed the concrete, Yang uprooted and replaced the posts with trees she cut with flame, and Pyrrha focused on final assemblies. Port delivered new bars for those that were missing or hopelessly rusted, and Yang welded them in place, Pyrrha ensuring proper alignment and spacing. By the time they were done, the light was fading from the overcast sky. Pyrrha was exhausted, in spite of Ruby's occasional recharging. Her frail human body could only go so far before it gave out. Accompanying them back, Yang stayed in their hearth to recharge, chatting with Blake and Ruby, while Pyrrha fell asleep on the couch. After a few hours Yang finally took her leave, sprinting all the way back to Weiss' house. Knocking twice, Yang entered. "Honey, I'm hooome!" Yang singsonged.

The room was dark, too dark. Not a single candle was lit. The hearth contained barely more than embers, and the office door was shut. Yang hummed, shrugging it off. Perhaps Weiss did not need the house lit today, and had stayed in her office alone. Yang threw a couple logs into the fireplace and breathed them alight, her essence surrounding them, filling the room with a creeping warmth. Then she crossed over to tap on the office door.

"Hey Weiss…" Yang faltered as she opened the door. The room was dark, and empty. "Hmm." Yang frowned. Had Weiss gone into town? Closing the door she opened the bedroom instead, and breathed a sigh of relief. Weiss was still there where Yang had left her that morning, a tiny frown on her pale face. Yang smiled at the sight, climbing onto the bed and laying beside the sleeping girl.
"Hey there." Yang whispered. No response. Yang chuckled. "Weiss...Weeeeeeiiiis..." Still nothing. Yang frowned, reaching forward and shaking Weiss lightly. "Weiss, wake up." Yang's voice wavered with worry as Weiss limply lolled about. Panic gripped Yang's soul. "Weiss!" She shook her harder this time, to no avail. Tossing off the blankets, she focused on Weiss' heart, reaching out to sense her heartbeat. It was normally slow, very slow, but now...nothing. "No, no, no no no no no Weiss please wake up!" Yang begged, clutching at the frail vampire's shoulders. She sobbed, red hot tears streaming down her face. What happened? Weiss was okay, she was healing, she was happy, growing closer to Yang with each day. She could not just go away like this!

Yang ran quaking hands through Weiss' hair, taking shaky breaths, trying to calm herself, poorly. An idea struck her and she flung herself from the bed, scrambling toward the door. It would take time to run, even at full speed, to Glynda, a half hour at least for a round trip, but so much could happen in half an hour. Weiss' soul still flickered within her, Yang could just perceive it, but her heart had been still for who knows how long. How long would her soul remain in a dying vessel? How long before the void took her?

Time was of the essence, so Yang decided to try something she had never practiced before. Something that could go really, really wrong even if it worked at all. Turning around, Yang faced the fireplace, stared into the flames, picturing her prior resting place, reaching out to the essence marking it within her soul. With a running start, Yang transformed and dove in.

Glynda relaxed as Blake trailed kisses down her throat. She allowed herself a gasp as sharp teeth nipped at the sensitive skin, and dug her fingers into Blake's bare back. It was rare that she accosted her like this, preferrering instead to let Glynda take the lead, but evidently she had decided tonight was a night when Glynda needed a push, and as the tension left her body under soothing ministrations, she could not…

The house shook, a dull roar emanating from the lounge room. Glynda growled, Blake groaned, dissolving as Glynda stormed out of her study, striding into the lounge only to stare in shock as she was met with flames and smoke. The fireplace gushed flames like a bonfire, and as they spread she could barely see movement within. Clenching her fist, she recited words in her head, and flung her splayed hand outward, a shockwave of frost rushing out, dousing the flames and coating the room in a layer of ice.

"What in the hell is going on?!" Glynda roared. As the smoke and frost cleared from the air, a figure became clear. Curled up, shivering and hyperventilating was the frozen form of Yang. "Yang?" Glynda called, moving to kneel beside her.

"W-W-Weiss-s help, needs h-help, h-heart not b-beating p-please Glynda!" Yang barely managed to shiver.

"Yang!?!" Ruby's voice called suddenly as the summon appeared in the doorway, a tired and confused Pyrrha beside her.

"Here, now." Glynda ordered, reaching out to them. To her credit, Pyrrha only hesitated for a moment before taking Ruby's hand, then Glynda's, and a few moments later they found themselves in the living room of Weiss' home, Pyrrha stumbling about before falling to her knees, heaving. Glynda moved quickly, picking up Yang and helping her to the fire. The flames reached out to consume Yang's shivering form. The aspect gasped, whimpering in pain. "I apologize Yang, I didn't k-ko-"

"Help Weiss, I don't matter!" Yang's panicked visage yelled from the flames.
Glynda quickly made her way into the bedroom. Weiss lie dead still, her skin a sicklier pallor than it had been when Glynda last saw her. Glynda sighed, scowling, laying a finger on Weiss' neck and waiting...nothing. Reaching down, she pulled a knife from her boot, and sliced open her finger. Opening Weiss mouth, she let blood drop onto her tongue. Weiss flinched, snarling silently, baring her teeth and biting at thin air. Relief filled Glynda. For a moment she considered lifting Weiss to her own throat, but quickly waved it away. A starved vampire feeding on fresh blood for the first time would be the end of her more likely than not, and she needed her faculties to handle the situation.

"What happened?" Yang's shaky voice came from the doorway. The aspect stumbled in.

Behind Yang, Glynda could see Ruby rubbing Pyrrha's back as she recovered from the journey. "When vampires do not feed, they enter a comatose state, similar to hibernation. They physically appear to die, until blood is presented to them." Glynda demonstrated once more, dripping more blood into Weiss' parched mouth.

"But...she fed...she...she asked me to leave and she...she..." Yang stumbled forward, collapsing onto the edge of the bed. "This is all my fault." She whimpered.

Glynda made eye contact with Ruby, who stared, worried after her. She shook her head, rising to close the door. "No Yang, this is her own. Weiss believed she was ready, and was clearly mistaken."

"I was supposed to protect her." Yang whispered. Glynda turned back to find Yang clutching Weiss' hand. "Winter warned me, she said Weiss would be a danger to herself and I didn't listen!"

"Yang, you did listen." Glynda soothed, crossing the room to the cryo unit, frowning when she opened it. "And Weiss did try." She held up the partially drained blood bag for Yang to see.

"I-is she gonna' be okay?" Yang asked. It was tragic, seeing Yang so afraid, so small, even her hair was lacking its usual luster.

"Weiss will be perfectly fine." Glynda replied, striding to sit opposite Yang. "Her body will absorb the blood, her heart will begin pumping once more, and all the damage will be healed." She explained, unsealing the blood pack.

"It's that simple?" Yang pressed.

"It's that simple Yang," Glynda confirmed. "Now I need you to focus, and open Weiss' mouth."

"Uh..." Yang hesitated.

"I need you to keep her restrained so I don't spill the blood all over her face Yang." Glynda explained.

"Hook your fingers over her teeth Yang." Glynda ordered. Yang grimaced but obeyed. "Hold her steady." Yang nodded, and Glynda moved the lip of the bag over Weiss' mouth, the crimson liquid beginning to pour down her throat.

Weiss flinched, then juddered, then shuddered, her jaw attempting to close in on invisible flesh, but failing due to Yang's fingers. She should have been stronger than this, Yang remembered the vice grip Weiss had when her hands were on her throat. She had wrestled vampires before. Weiss was
so weak, and it tore at her.

"Yang...Yang." Glynda’s voice snapped Yang’s attention away, and she noticed the blood bag had emptied. Glynda laid a hand on her shoulder. "It's okay, you can let go now." She assured. Yang took a shuddering breath, and removed her fingers, closing Weiss’ mouth. "Listen." Glynda ordered, gesturing to Weiss’ chest.

Yang lay her head down over Weiss’ heart - though she could just reach out and sense it - and waited...there it was, a heartbeat, slow but steady. Somehow the sound, rather than some abstract sense, had more of an impact. Weiss was alive, she was alive! Yang half laughed, half sobbed, clutching at Weiss’ body, which drew in a long, slow breath.

"You're falling for her." Blake’s warped voice spoke...except she did not. "Aren't you?"

Yang looked up. Glynda still sat before her, only she had changed. Her emerald eyes now glowed a familiar golden hue, the edges of her form flickering in the dark.

"Blake?" Yang questioned.

Glynda...Blake nodded. "I know how it feels Yang...to fall for a human, to mourn the idea of their passing," Blake explained. "To have your perceptions of humanity shattered and reformed." Glynda touched the center of her chest. "To be confronted with the idea of true loss is a terrifying thing Yang. And Glynda was a reckless spirit when we met." She laughed, her voice back to normal. "I fear I still am at times."

"You're bonded." Yang realized in awe. "Body and soul."

"Shhhh." It was so strange seeing such a playful grin on Glynda's face. She looked like the cat who ate the canary. "Do you love Weiss, Yang?" Such a small, simple question, with answers both simple and complex in turn.

"In all my existence, I've never felt this way." Yang stated. "Never...never had this...no one has ever made me want them like Weiss. No one has made me so afraid of losing them to the void." Yang blinked away shimmering tears, taking up Weiss’ hand in both her own. "I've always been used and cast to the winds, but Weiss clings, she makes me feel wanted. She makes me feel loved and damnit I'm gonna' love her back...however she lets me." Yang sniffled.

Glynda smiled. "Good. That is what Weiss needs."

"I didn't seem to do much good." Yang mumbled.

"Was Weiss happy with you Yang?" Glynda asked.

"I don't know." Yang admitted. "I thought so, but if she was happy, why couldn't she drink?"

"For the same reason she didn't want you to see." Glynda replied. "She feels ashamed of what she has become. She needed a push, one I intended to provide, but her leaving prevented that."

"So what, I should have stayed, made her let me watch until she did it?" Yang questioned.

"No." Glynda shook her head. "That's what I should have done. You? You did exactly what you should have done Yang. You gave her comfort from the harsh reality of the world." Glynda sighed, laying a finger on Weiss’ neck, feeling her pulse.

"Don't we have to hook her up or something?" Yang asked.
"No, I want her hungry when she wakes up." Glynda answered.

"What?" Yang snapped. "Why?"

Glynda merely looked at Weiss sadly. "So she can confront that harsh reality."
Chapter Summary

"Maybe you just never thought about it."

Weiss walked through a forest, her skin unblemished. So dense was the canopy that no light shone through. A cold wind blew through the trees, yet she found herself unaffected. For a fire burned within her, a gift, treasured and precious, warming her tattered soul. Just the thought of the flame's flickering drove her onward through the thicket, seeking freedom, her salvation from the dark. She sought the light, for the light provided safety, its strong arms protecting her from the world like a mother's embrace. She could feel it in her bones, and now, she could see it with her eyes, a smile growing across her face as the first pinprick appeared.

Weiss pushed forward with renewed vigor and the pinprick grew, until with a final lurch, she found herself at the edge of a clearing, light streaming down, blinding her. But she refused to falter, for her goal was within, shining like the sun, the very essence of warmth, the light of her life. Laughing, she advanced, stepping into the light, only to flinch backward...it burned. She reached forward, only to flinch back again, her hand red raw, stinging. She clutched at the throbbing limb, squinting into the distance. Her light beckoned still, a silent, warm plea for her to come forth. And so she gritted her teeth, and obeyed.

The pain was excruciating, like a million needles puncturing her flesh, a thousand tons of pressure weighing her down. But still she pushed forward, even as her skin bubbled and blistered, even as her vocal chords tore apart, even as the world blurred and dimmed, the very eyes burning within her skull. She would have given anything for it to stop, but not the light of her life, the one refuge from her pain. She would suffer a thousand incinerations to behold her light, one last time.

"Please..." Weiss plead, to what or whom she did not know. "Just one more time..." Just one more time, and she could perish in peace.

The pain ended, everything ended. All was dark, but for the glowing lilac irises before her. "Snowball?" Yang's heavenly voice whispered.

"Yang." Weiss wept, burying herself in Yang's chest.

"It's okay Snowball, I've got you." Yang soothed.

"It hurt." Weiss whined, shuddering. "It hurt so much."

"You're okay now, I promise, I found you." Yang insisted.

"I thought they'd stopped." Weiss choked. "I thought I'd be at peace."

Yang swallowed, taking in a deep breath and steeling herself. "You died Weiss." She bit out.

Weiss froze, shocked. "What?"
"I came back, and you were dead." Yang explained. "Your heart had stopped, you scared the hell out of me Weiss. I nearly burned down Glynda's place trying to get you help."

"I-I died?" Weiss barked.

"You starved yourself to death!" Yang cried. "You let me think you were okay, and then I came back and I thought I'd lost you!"

"I-I-" Weiss stammered.

"What was I going to do if I'd really lost you?" Yang pressed. "What was Winter going to do? Glynda? Ruby? We all thought you were okay-"

"I'm not okay!" Weiss snapped.

"Then tell us!" Yang choked back. "Tell us. We love you. I love you. I dedicate myself to you Weiss..." This time Yang buried her face in Weiss' chest. Her tears stung, but did not burn. "Please don't leave me." She whimpered.

Weiss lay there in shock, slowly letting everything sink in. First the nightmare, then the revelation that she had died, again, and now not only had Yang confessed her love, but begged her not to leave. Yang, Goddess of Flame, clinging to her like a scared child. It broke her heart. "You are my light Yang." Weiss whispered, wrapping her arms around Yang's head, fingers threading through her golden hair. "From them moment we met you were providing for me. You gifted me your essence, and when I awoke, you gifted me your warmth, your company, so precious to me...but your true gift to me Yang..." Weiss moved her hand to Yang's cheek, coaxing her lilac gaze upward. "...was you."

And with that Weiss kissed Yang. For the first time their lips met, and Weiss swore they felt hotter than every other time they had graced her being. Yang's hands trailed up to her jaw, their kiss deepening, a hot tongue begging permission at her lips, permission she readily gave as heat pooled in her, below her belly, letting out a pleased whine as it explored her lips, hot and wet, brushing against her own...she tasted of cinnamon...and then the kiss was over. Yang loomed over her, lilac eyes and golden mane glowing like beacons in the dark. She was so beautiful, the throbbing in her nethers screamed at her to pull her back down.

"W-Weiss...before we go any further...we need to talk to the others." Yang hesitantly stated.

Weiss felt a cold chill descend upon her, a lump growing in her throat. "I know..." She whispered thickly. "Are they mad at me?"

"No Weiss." Yang leaned down to kiss her once more, softly this time. "But this isn't going to be easy, for any of us. You know what needs to happen."

Weiss felt the sickly trickle of anxiety pool in her chest. "I-I know." She whimpered, eyes beginning to sting. "I'm scared."

"I'll be by your side the entire time." Yang promised.

Weiss nodded, reaching to pull Yang back down entirely, her warm weight a comfort on her bare chest. "I love you too my Light."

To say Weiss was surprised when Glynda hugged her would have been an understatement. She had expected disappointment, anger, shame. Not comfort. "I'm sorry." Weiss murmured fearfully into
"I know." Glynda sighed. "I'm sorry too." Glynda's arms tightened around Weiss, and she could not resist nuzzling into her warmth, breathing in the strong lavender scent which clung to her being, the faint thrum of her heartbeat became evident, alongside the faint copper tinge of life's blood, rushing beneath her. She made to retreat, but Glynda held fast. "Weiss."

"Glynda-" Weiss tried to protest.

"Don't resist." Glynda plead. "Stop fighting your instincts Weiss. It's okay, I give you my permission. Take all you need." She assured, bending down and craning her neck.

Weiss could have shoved Glynda away, but she found herself unwilling, staring at the offered flesh. The scent became stronger, the heartbeat louder. Her mouth felt parched, every part of her ached to lean in, to sink her teeth deep and drink to her heart's content. But she could not. The very thought horrified her, victimizing a human, like Cinder had victimized her, it pained her, agonized her.

Just as the first sob escaped Weiss' lips, she felt herself tugged back into a strong, calming embrace. Glynda barely stumbled as Yang shoved her away, the aspect's crimson eyes burning into her. "This isn't working!" Yang snapped, running her hands soothingly through Weiss' hair as she shook.

Glynda sighed in frustration, turning away. "Then we need to find a way that works." She stated. "Weiss, if you do not feel, you will die, again."

"J-just hook me to the IV again." Weiss stammered.

"The IV was a temporary solution, to keep you alive and calm while you recovered." Glynda scoffed. "You should know this. It is in the book I wrote for you." She spun around, flinging her hand angrily.

"I know!" Weiss yelled, her bloodstained face turning to glare at Glynda. "I've read it. I read it all. How much blood the average vampire needs, the desirability of virgin blood, the feeding euphoria so great there's a chance that I might become addicted!"

"You can become addicted to many things in life." Glynda dismissed. "It doesn't stop people from indulging in them, and living perfectly happy, functional lives, and unlike many of those things you need blood to live!" She hissed. "If you refuse to do what is necessary to keep yourself alive, I cannot help you." Glynda's face fell. "Do you really want to keep doing this? Starving yourself until we pour blood down your throat like a petulant child? Because if that's the life you wish to lead, you're better off walking into the sunlight. It will be a far less cruel fate." Weiss shuddered, a phantom pain running through her body, her nightmare fresh in her mind.

"I have an idea." Ruby piped up. Everyone turned to look at her, including Pyrrha, who had awoken sometime during Glynda's rant.

"Yes Ruby?" Glynda inquired, brow raised.

"My blood is like Pyrrha's right?" Ruby asked.

Glynda nodded. "Identical as far as I can tell. Ironwood's tests found no differences either."

"Try my blood!" Ruby yelled, slipping from behind Pyrrha and rushing to Weiss.
"Ruby-" Weiss started.

"I'm not human Weiss, but I have human blood." Ruby cut her off. "I have more blood than I know what to do with! And I can control it, and I can heal myself!" Ruby counted off with her fingers as she approached. "You won't hurt me Weiss. You can't hurt me. Let me help you live, please." Ruby held her hands out toward Weiss.

Weiss glanced around the room. Glynda seemed passive, Blake curious, Pyrrha obviously trying to hide concern. Yang quirked her brow and looked at her. "I've never felt the desire to feed on you before."

"Maybe you just never thought about it." Ruby shrugged.

"That...is a strange but fair point...maybe...maybe that's a good thing." Weiss looked to her fellow Huntress. "Pyrrha, are you comfortable with this?"

Pyrrha plastered on a kind smile. "So long as Ruby is, I will support her Weiss. As I will support you." Her smile grew more genuine as she spoke, a sight that brought Weiss relief, however little was possible during this trying time.

"Thank you Pyrrha...this…" Weiss took a shaky breath, stepping out of Yang's embrace to approach Ruby. "This is…" She clasped her hands together. "I-I can do this…I need to do this." She said, more to herself than anyone else.

"You can do this." Ruby encouraged, stepping forward to clasp Weiss' hands in her own. "I know you can."

Weiss choked a laugh, eyes stinging once again. She met Ruby's familiar gaze and smiled. "M-maybe you're a cheerleading aspect." She joked thickly.

"I don't know what that is." Ruby smiled back regardless, provoking another laugh from the shaking vampire.

"It doesn't matter." Weiss admitted, drawing ever closer, Ruby's eyes gleaming, drawing her in. "Just keep doing it."

"You can do this Weiss." Ruby repeated, their faces less than an inch from each other, her floral scent wafting over Weiss.

"I can do it." Weiss' gaze flickered to Ruby's neck for an instant.

"You need to do it." Ruby insisted.

"I need to…" Weiss tore her gaze away and leaned in, Ruby's aroma growing stronger as her senses sharpened.

"Almost there." Ruby encouraged. Opening her mouth, Weiss closed her eyes...and sunk her teeth into Ruby's flesh. "You did it." Ruby whispered.

Weiss' world turned black and white, blood rushing through her fangs, the majority traveling through ducts down the back of her throat, the rest filtering through the arteries connected to her gums, rushing directly to her brain. It was...like nothing she could truly describe in words. Pleasure, ecstaticy, happiness, joy, delight, power, all at once and a million times over, but different. She never wanted to stop. Why would she? Ruby said she would be fine. Ruby was nice, such a beautiful little girl, such a wonderful friend. She would stay with her, she would treat her well,
"That's enough, Yang." Glynda ordered. Weiss had been feeding for fifteen seconds now, and apart from the initial shudder, and a muffled moan, showed no signs of awareness. Glynda had expected this, and instructed Yang accordingly.

"Come on Snowball, ease up." Yang ordered, wrapping an arm around Weiss' waist and a hand around her throat, squeezing gently. "Come on, don't be greedy."

With a firmer squeeze and tug, Weiss pulled free, gasping for air. Ruby staggered back into Glynda and Pyrrha's arms, the punctures on her throat healing instantly, any stray drops of blood being absorbed by her skin. Pyrrha ran her fingers over the area to find it completely smooth, before a strangled moan drew her attention back to Weiss. The vampire convulsed in Yang's arms, eyes wide, revealing blackened sclera. Shockwaves ran through her form, fingers splayed outward, grasping at thin air, her back arched, mouth hung wide, each spasm emitting another choked exclamation.

"Did I hurt her?" Ruby gasped. In response, a final, languid shudder ran through Weiss' body, accompanied by a long, drawn out, blissful moan, before she collapsed entirely, hanging limply in Yang's arms, twitching.

"Well." Blake cut in, from beside Glynda. "That was educational." Yang chuckled, lowering herself to the floor, shifting Weiss' huffing form to her lap. Weiss began to giggle, like a drunken teenager told a silly joke. It was mirthful, it was joyful, it was surprisingly intimidating given the circumstances, especially as it turned to hysterical cackling. "She sounds like you Glynda." Blake smirked, nudging her bondmate.

"It was literally one time." Glynda shot back.

"At least she's happy?" Ruby half observed, half questioned.

"I don't think this is...happiness Ruby…" Pyrrha pulled Ruby back to the couch, holding her close. "Do you feel lightheaded?"

"No, I feel fine, just a little weird." Ruby assured, snuggling into Pyrrha's embrace.

Weiss' laughter slowly died down, until she gazed dreamily up at Yang with a cheshire grin. "My Light." She crooned, reaching up to cup Yang's face.

"Hey Snowball, how are you feeling?" Yang leaned down, only to be met with a kiss.

"I feel like...a goddess for dessert." Weiss purred, flipping over with a giggle and straddling the surprised aspect.

"Alright, alright, calm down Snowball." Yang laughed as Weiss' lips trailed kisses along her throat.

"I wonder what would happen if I fed from you-" Weiss started.

Yang grabbed Weiss by the shoulders and held her away. "Weiss, don't, you will burn to death." She warned as firmly and seriously as possible with a lusty vampire, high on blood, attempting to jump her essence. A pouting vampire.

"Aw...what about...down here." Weiss' hand crept down to cup Yang through the thin firesilk of her gown.
Yang bit her lip, letting go to snatch both Weiss' hands. "Weiss, we still have company."

"Oh no, please go on." Blake drawled.

Weiss stiffened. "Blake?" She exclaimed, twisting around, freezing when she saw the others. "Oh...oh right...you can leave now. I'm quite alright, and I have business to attend to if you don't mind."

"We are staying the night Weiss." Glynda stated, deadpan.

"Witch." Weiss huffed.

Glynda sighed, rubbing her temples. "Lovely, she's a smartass when high."

But regardless, tonight was a victory, so far. Hopefully tomorrow, when Weiss had sobered up, they could gauge the true effects of her first feeding. Hopefully she would handle it well.

Weiss' bloodhaze had lasted until early in the morning, during which time she had continually snipped at Glynda, flirted heavily with Yang, and on more than one occasion, become oddly intimate with Ruby, hugging, complimenting and smelling her, only stopping when, in a case of rare firmness, Ruby ordered Weiss to please stop, as she was making Pyrrha irritable. Even through her haze Weiss seemed to take the admonition to heart, and retreated to her office with a confused Yang in tow. Blake found the entire affair deeply amusing. It was as if Weiss' inner teenager had finally come to the surface after so many years of suppression. An amorous, bitchy teenager.

Pyrrha had fallen asleep after Weiss left. Having her rest interrupted twice had taken its toll, and at Glynda's suggestion, she had taken Weiss' bed. The vampire would not be using it. Weiss was far too hyped up to sleep, and indeed many vampires rarely did so. Humans required rest to regenerate their muscles and digest new experiences. Vampires did so constantly, so sleep was reserved for relaxation, and conserving blood, neither of which were on Weiss' agenda. Glynda, however, decided she had earned a rest of her own, fetching a blanket from Weiss' storage room laying it on one of the couches, Blake's feline form curling up in her lap. As far as slumber parties went, Glynda had attended worse...and stranger.

A dull clack stirred Glynda from her slumber, and she groaned, scowling at the back of her eyelids. "I apologize Glynda." Weiss' voice softly spoke.

"Wakey, wakey." Blake whispered inside Glynda's head. "She looks so guilty."

Glynda scoffed, opening her eyes to squint in the firelight. "Good morning Weiss." She groaned. "How do you feel?" Blinking the sleep from her eyes, she looked across to see Weiss seated on the couch opposite, a mug of coffee in hand, another on the table before Glynda. Yang sauntered over, passing Blake a cup of tea.

"Well, very well as a matter of fact, which makes me feel all the worse." Weiss grimaced. "Everything is a blurry, mumbling haze...but I remember enough..." Yang flopped down beside her, slipping an arm around her shoulders. The vampire leaned into the aspect's warmth with a sigh. "I called you a witch."

"An astute observation, you get a gold star." Glynda jested, reaching for her coffee, taking a searing sip, groaning as the hot liquid sent a shiver down her spine.

"Regardless, the implication was insulting, and I apologize." Weiss insisted. "You saved my life,
again, due to my foolishness."

"I'll accept your apology…" Glynda pushed herself up, somehow having ended up lying on Blake's chest in the night. ". . . . . on the grounds that you hold nothing back as I quiz you." She reached into her pocket, pulling forth a notebook and pencil, flipping to a clean page.

Weiss nodded. "Of course."
Chapter Summary

"Why is Myrtenaster floating?"

Weiss glanced at Blake, who was smirking as she sipped her tea. "When you began feeding, describe the state you entered." Glynda instructed.

"Euphoric...doesn't begin to scratch the surface." Weiss answered, shaking her head. "I was utterly lost in the sensation."

"Hmm...how much do you remember of what came afterwards?" Glynda asked.

"Ah...at this point...most of it...at least the uh...important details..." Weiss struggled.

"Such as the orgasm?" Blake suggested. Weiss sunk into her seat, lips pulled taught as she started at an empty corner of the room, skin notably blushed. "Because the orgasm was interesting."

"Yes Blake, the orgasm was indeed of interest." Glynda confirmed. "I knew that a first feeding can have pleasurable effects, but to that extent..."

"Can we please not talk about this?" Weiss sighed.

"Everything is important to note Weiss." Glynda declared. "Such as your fixation upon Ruby. Do you recall your mindset?"

"Infatuation, affection..." Weiss screwed her face up. "Loyalty, obedience."

"You obeyed when ordered to stop." Glynda noted. "Perhaps a minor enthrallment?"

"It was unsettling." Weiss shivered. "I wanted Ruby's approval. I needed Ruby's approval, and when she wasn't happy, it felt like bucket of water had been poured over my body...it didn't go away for an hour, and I think that's what sobered me up."

Glynda scribbled a note and hummed. "How do you feel now?"

Weiss handed her mug to Yang, and held her hands before her. They trembled slightly. "Energized...like...like I drank two pots of coffee. I want to run, I want to fight, I want to yell and scream with joy." Weiss grinned, clenching her fists. "I feel like I could take on an army. I feel like I could take on you, which is insane. This feeling is utterly delusional, and yet it remains."

Glynda wrote more notes, a troubled look on her face. "This is a very exacerbated rendition of the first hand accounts I have recorded. Euphoria, arousal and power are common sensations, but to this extent? Perhaps it is because you are a newborn, perhaps starvation enhanced the effects, but in addition to those I believe Ruby's blood has empowered you. Time will tell, but for now I feel this is a success." She shut her notebook and tucked it away.
"We can blow off some steam outside maybe." Yang suggested. "You wanted to get your hands on me after all." She teased.

Weiss sighed, scowling at Blake, whose smirk was borderline gleeful. "Perhaps later...after all, I need to resume training."

"Weiss, do not push yourself." Glynda warned.

"I'm not pushing myself, I'm regaining momentum." Weiss excused. "For almost three weeks now I have been laying around, hiding from the world, allowing everyone to treat me like I'm made of glass, and as pleasurable as it may be, it is not healthy for my career. I have responsibilities to attend to, and a hunt to head."

Glynda frowned, fixing Weiss with a worried gaze. "Nora and Ren are heading the hunt, with Ironwood's troops as support."

"And that excuses me to hide away?" Weiss scowled back.

Glynda did not falter, even as Weiss stood, crossing over into her office. "You were in recovery Weiss, physically and psychologically wounded, adapting to your condition, poorly." She retorted, standing herself. Blake and Yang exchanged a look, the former questioning, the latter amused.

"You were in no condition to handle any sort of responsibility, let alone lead a hunt, and you still have a long way to go."

Weiss came from her office, Myrtenaster held in crimson gloved hands. "Cinder came to this island, my home, seduced me, stole my humanity, took my integrity as a huntress!"

"Your integrity rests on your ability to make wise decisions under duress, something you have proven incapable of." Glynda scolded, taking a sip from her mug. "What would you do if you met Cinder again, hmm? A blooded vampire, a pureblood, she is faster and stronger than you, this-"

Glynda waved her hand, and Myrtenaster was tugged roughly from an indignant Weiss' grip, floating in the air in wispy purple strands. "...this toothpick won't protect you from a fist through your heart. I will not permit you to throw your life away!"

Weiss and Glynda stared each other down, the former twitching with barely contained rage, the other coldly glaring at the young vampire, until the sound of a door opening caused them to pause. "Glynda?" Pyrrha called, exiting Weiss' bedroom, Ruby in tow. "What is going on?"

"Why is Myrtenaster floating?" Ruby followed.

The sound of footsteps preceded the sword being plucked from the air, Yang holding it by the leather grip. "Because momma hen is clucking over Weissey's safety." She joked, attempting to ease the tension further. Glynda scoffed. "Look, vampires are nasty, yes, Weiss is out of practice, yes, and she's had a tough time adjusting, yes, but she isn't going into this alone." Yang handed the blade to Weiss, and slid her arm around her waist. "I'll be by her side from now on."

"As will we, Yang, but the fact remains that...wait." Pyrrha yawned. "Sorry...what exactly were you talking about?"

"Perhaps we should have some more tea, and speak as a group." Blake suggested, still seated on the couch.

"I'll boil some water!" Yang chirped, spinning on her heel and spanking Weiss as she left.

Weiss gasped. "Yang!"
Weiss seemed unperturbed by the sun. It was a shock that came in the middle of their group discussion. Freshly caffeinated, Weiss had made the point of her strength of will by flinging open a set of curtains, bathing her in sunlight, however dulled by the perpetually overcast sky. She did not even flinch, though she did let out a relieved laugh when she did not find herself burning. It was decided that Weiss would, for the time being, train, to grow used to her newfound strength, which she discovered tended to throw her off balance, the once familiar weight of Myrtenaster barely a shadow of what it once seemed.

Glynda and Blake departed, the former irritated, but at least pleased Weiss was not going out into the forest to hunt Cinder herself, the latter with an everlasting smirk on her face, telling Yang to have fun before they disappeared. Weiss was left fuming, and blushing. Ruby was left a little confused. She thought they were going to train, not play games. Were games part of the training?

"You're slower than you used to be Pyrrha!" Weiss taunted, squaring off against her fellow huntress. They had begun with weighted training swords, but those had fared poorly against Weiss' vampiric strength, so they had switched to live weaponry. It added to the thrill for them both.

"Or maybe you are too fast!" Pyrrha punctuated each word with blow after furious blow, each barely shifting Weiss' defense. The final blow was held by Weiss, who proceeded to rapidly fling it to the side, knocking Pyrrha just off balance enough that a stout shoulder charge felled her entirely, and Pyrrha found herself panting on the ground, looking down the point of Myrtenaster, and the Cheshire grin beyond its hilt.

"Perhaps a bit of both." Weiss teased.

Pyrrha groaned as Yang cheered with Ruby from a wooden bench on the sideline. "You got her Weissicle!" Yang clapped as Ruby ran from her side.

"Pyrrha, are you okay?!" Ruby cried, coming to kneel before her, helping her sit up.

"I'm fine Ruby... just..." Pyrrha huffed. "Out of my league. If Cinder is all this and more..." A worried look crossed her face, and she swallowed. "I need a rest."

"Let me heal you." Ruby offered.

Pyrrha waved her off. "No, not this time, let me feel mortal for a moment. Here." Pyrrha held up her sword, hilt to Ruby. "Have you been paying attention to how she fights?"

"Yes mistress!" Ruby beamed.

Pyrrha reflected it, handing Ruby the sword. "Then avenge your fallen mistress." She chuckled, allowing Ruby to help her up, nodding at an amused Weiss and hobbling off to join Yang.

"I won't be going easy on you." Weiss taunted, twirling her blade.

Ruby took a ready stance and grinned. "Neither will I!" And she lunged.

Pyrrha reached Yang in time to witness Ruby's offense, the sudden action and skill taking Weiss momentarily off guard, before she found her footing and began her defense. It was fascinating, seeing such a small and innocent looking girl take on a seasoned huntress so well, each meeting of their blades ringing high and loud. Ruby even imitated Weiss' flares. "You taught her well." Yang admired. "She's doing everything you did, but better."

Pyrrha could not decide if her pride was more wounded than swelling. Though as Ruby dodged...
and deflected a series of rapid blows, she found herself favoring the latter. "She is magnificent, besting me with little effort, keeping up with Weiss...it makes me feel...small." It pained her to admit it, but it was the truth. Glynda was a Master Witch, Blake an aspect of dark, Yang a goddess of flame, Weiss a vampire, and Ruby...whatever Ruby was, she so effortlessly surpassed her, it left her wondering what her purpose in life was.

"I've found myself wondering what my purpose was time and again." Yang spoke up, as if reading Pyrrha's mind. Perhaps she could. "Used to be my purpose to burn. Seemed obvious, aspect of flame and all...but every time I got summoned it just...felt less and less like a purpose and more like...my state of being. And that state was being abused by humans time and again."

Weiss swept her feet beneath Ruby's, but she turned her momentum into a roll, ending back on her feet in barely a second. They both paused to laugh at that, joyfully, playfully, before resuming their duel.

"I got really low once." Yang continued. "Thought maybe...maybe I should just let go, pass on my essence to another generation...but Ruby found me again, and even though she couldn't speak, she tingled in just the right way that I chose a different path. And here I am, with new purpose." She gestured towards the fighting couple, who were now circling each other, stopping to twitch at one another before continuing. "And she is beautiful." Yang purred, gazing lovingly at the ivory vampire, fangs bared in a playful snarl.

But Pyrrha found her gaze squarely on Ruby. Her form perfect, her grip sure, her gaze firm, she looked every bit the huntress Pyrrha once sought to be, poised to leap at danger fearlessly, without hesitation, without mercy. "I think I know my own." Pyrrha said shakily, eyes stinging, pride and affection welling in equal measure.

Pyrrha found herself brought back to her early days of training. Coral and Helia would constantly challenge each other, fighting tooth and nail, sometimes literally, until one came out on top. It was neck and neck the entire time she knew them. One would have thought them mortal enemies, but no...off the training field, they were the exact opposite...she really should reach out to them. They had reached out to her, after they said their goodbyes, but Pyrrha had never felt right responding. She had failed them, just as she had failed Jaune.

"Pyrrha?" Yang's voice snapped her from her reverie.

Pyrrha plastered on a smile when she saw Yang's worried gaze. "Just old memories Yang, I'm fine."

Yang chuckled, sadly. "The old memories hit the hardest." She commented. Pyrrha could not help but agree. "Oh damn!"

Pyrrha followed Yang's gaze back to the fight to see Ruby had sliced open her wrist, summoning forth a tendril of essence. Weiss seemed entranced at first, but shook her head free, just in time for the tendril to whip forward, wrapping around her wrist. She and Ruby locked eyes for a moment, then Ruby yanked, and Weiss found herself flung off her feet and onto the ground.

"Hah!" Ruby cheered, jumping up and down as her essence returned to her body. "That's for Pyrrha!" She turned to the audience, beaming. "I did it Pyrrha!"

"Good one Rubes!" Yang encouraged.

"Well done Ruby." Pyrrha praised.
"You little cheat!" Ruby was taken off guard by Weiss suddenly slamming into her. "I don't have blood tendrils to play with!"

"Aaaah I'm sorry Weiss!" Ruby squealed as Weiss mounted her, twisting her arms behind her back.

"You're lucky I'm well fed you little bloodbag!" Weiss hissed.

"Perhaps we should step in." Pyrrha worried, despite Ruby's apparent indestructibility.

"Nah, let the kids have fun." Yang laughed. "Weiss will figure out she can't actually do anything and then...well I'll teach Ruby what I know."

After the training session died down, Weiss expressed her desire to go into town. It had been too long since she had visited the populous. Their floral gifts had touched Weiss, still unused to appreciation for her work. She did what was expected of her, what she had vowed to do. Weiss was a servant of the people, a blade to be wielded against those who sought to harm the innocent. A simple thank you left her satisfied. But the people of Patch were gracious, and as time went on Weiss found herself the recipient of assorted baked goods, artworks of various mediums, and most importantly, commissions.

It had started as a hobby. Between studying the arts and honing her skills with Myrtenaster, Weiss brewed and mixed cosmetic potions, balms and salves. Many healing ingredients had a multitude of cosmetic applications, so it doubled as practice for more important concoctions. Initially it had been entirely personal, but after compliments from Velvet on how pure her skin was, Weiss had offered to share her stocks in exchange for discounted clothing. When Blake learned of this, she suggested making a business of it, as the people of Patch had to import products of such quality, ramping up the prices.

Velvet agreed to display a selection of Weiss' stock, a local glass blower supplied her with the needed jars, and within a month, Weiss found herself frequently visited by the island's many women, and even some men, asking after the extent of her practice. The initial boom was very profitable, if not in lien, but goods and services, and though over time commissions died down, she had earned many customers for life, and in the process found the majority of her needs taken care of. Eggs, milk and cheese from the island Dairy, honey and wax from the Apiary, bread and flower from the mill, anything she ever had need of had been traded for. All for the simple price of beauty. Vanity had never been so profitable.

But several weeks of bedrest had probably left Weiss with a laundry list of replenishments to fill, so Velvet would be the first stop for her trip to town. Pyrrha had retired, wishing to recover from the morning's training session, but Ruby elected to accompany Weiss and Yang, and so the multicolored trio made their way into town, Weiss wrapped in her hooded cloak. Though the sun may not pain her, she still felt the need to take precaution, better to be safe than sunburnt.

"Miss Weiss!" A high pitched voice cried as they entered the town square. Weiss halted, several heads turned towards her in surprise, and a young brunette girl pattered over. "You're back! You're okay!" She cried, jumping forward and wrapping her arms around Weiss' waist.

"I'm fine, how are you?" Octavia clasped Weiss' hand in both her own. "We heard you were
wounded, but not how badly. The whole town's been worried sick."

"I appreciate your concern Octavia, and the flowers." Weiss smiled. "I take it the lavender was yours?"

"They were, your wards are running strong." Octavia admired, unclasping Weiss' hand. "Will we be seeing you more often? You look well."

"I am recovering, and well enough to resume my duties." Weiss replied.

A small crowd was gathering about them, murmurs of excitement and joy filling their ears. "Huntress Weiss, it is good to see you alive and well!" A man greeted.

"May we ask what befell you?" Another asked.

Weiss closed her eyes and nodded. She felt the warm weight of Yang's hand upon her shoulder. "It is good to see you Gregory, and yes Theo, you may." The crowd fell silent, and Weiss continued. "Let it never be said that I am a perfect protector, for I was taken off guard by an unexpected enemy. My wounds were difficult to recover from, and I am still not entirely healed, but I have faith that in time I will be more capable than I ever was before. So long as I live and learn, I will continue to protect you with my life...and provide you with quality cosmetic products. Hopefully I will have replenished your stocks by the end of the week. You can stop worrying Gloria." Weiss joked, one of the women in the crowd blushing. "Now, if you would excuse me, I have errands to run. You too Bethany, I need my waist back."

Weiss petted the girl's head once more, and she giggled, pulling away. "Okay Miss Weiss" Bethany returned to her mother's side, taking her hand.

The crowd bid her farewell and went along their way. "Thank you for your service Weiss." Octavia smiled. "We wish you the best."

"Likewise Octavia, take care." Weiss bid, and watched as mother and child walked away.

"Inspiring." Winter's voice called from behind them.

Weiss spun around. "Winter," She gasped. "How fares your hunt?"

"Poorly." Winter frowned. "How fares your health?" She looked to Yang, whose jaw clenched.

"After some difficulty adjusting, I feel I am progressing." Weiss answered, reaching for Yang's hand once more.

"How is Penny?" Ruby chimed in.

"Chipper, and helpful, she speaks of you often." Winter quirked her head. "It's...odd hearing such an innocent voice come from such a conflicting form."

"Can I see her later?" Ruby requested.

Winter sighed, suppressing a smile. "So long as Ironwood approves, and I don't doubt he will." She shook her head. "But for now I must be on my way. I only came to town to retrieve my cloak from Velvet." She indicated the garment draped over her shoulders. "She asked after you Ruby, I believe you have a commission of your own in the works."

"Oh yes!" Ruby cheered. "She's making me a cloak, and in exchange I have to model for her in the
community markets."

"She roped you into that?" Weiss chuckled. "Pyrrha and I agreed during my first year here. Let's just say Velvet's personal line is a tad...risque."

"Oh?" Yang grinned. "I'm liking the sound of that."

Weiss smirked, elbowing Yang, who wrapped her arm about her. "I still have it somewhere." Weiss continued. "Skimpy barmaid sounds pleasurable, but it showed far more skin than I am comfortable with."

"Maybe you should model it for us." Yang innocently suggested. "So Ruby knows what she's getting into."

"Ooh, will you?" Ruby asked.

"Perhaps you should attempt to retain your modesty." Winter deadpanned, exhausted, pinching her brow. "What little remains."

"Why are all humans so obsessed with covering themselves?" Ruby wondered aloud. "Our forms are so beautiful! Pyrrha's skin is so smooth and he-"

"Good day sister." Winter firmly interrupted, pulling Weiss into an embrace. "Do take care. Resist corruptive influences. Wash behind your ears and all the good sisterly advice I failed to instill upon you as a child."

Weiss laughed, returning the hug. "I love you too sister." She mumbled fondly. "Take care."
"What's a hickey?"

The door jingled as it opened. Womp squeaked, and Velvet looked up from her work, smiling at the sight before her. "Weiss!" She cried, rushing around the counter to pull her into yet another hug. "Gods I've missed you." She crooned, pulling back to cup her face with a grin. "You look amazing!"

Weiss rolled her eyes. "Were you expecting jutting fangs and gaunt cheeks?" She teased.

Velvet managed to look a little guilty. "Fangs are interesting." She blushed, looking away. Then she noticed her companions. "Ruby hey, uh, hello?"

"Yang, Fire Goddess, nice to meet ya!" She greeted, holding out her hand.

"Yang, Fire Goddess, nice to meet ya!" She greeted, holding out her hand.

"Fire?"

"She doesn't burn, don't worry." Weiss soothed.

Stepping aside, Velvet took Yang's hand. "Oh, you're really warm though." She giggled.

"That's why Weiss keeps me around." Yang laughed.

"Hush you." Weiss chastised. "How is my backlog Velvet?" She asked, reaching out towards Womp, only for the animal to scurry back.

"Lengthy, but they were all understanding." Velvet replied. "I told them not to bring perishable payments until you were on your feet."

"Womp...it's alright, I'm still Weiss, here…" Weiss lay her hand flat in the basket, making eye contact with the creature. It quivered, then calmed, slowly sniffing the air, then her finger tips, before slowly approaching and nuzzling into her hand. Weiss smiled, running her hand down Womp's ears gently once more. It's eyes closed.

"Weiss...Weiss?" Velvet called.

"Hmm?" Weiss jerked, noticing Velvet by her side once more.

"Are you alright?" Velvet asked.

"Yes, yes, I was just...Womp was a little put off by my scent I think." Weiss thought aloud.

"Oh, right, well your order list is here." Velvet reached over the counter, picking up a leather bound notebook. "And the empty jars and such are out back, so I'll get 'em when I'm done with Ruby. Now Ruby." Velvet beamed. "I'm nearly done."
"Already?" Ruby wondered.

"Yeah already." Velvet confirmed. "I've been doing it in my spare time, come have a look." She headed toward the back room, and Ruby hurried to follow, leaving Yang alone with Weiss, who scanned the latest page of the logbook.

"So, cosmetics huh?" Yang started, leaning against the counter.

"Hmm, lucrative, and enjoyable." Weiss nodded. "Fortunately the bulk of these I keep a surplus of."

"I've always been a fan of the more natural look personally." Yang noted.

"You can change your appearance at will." Weiss challenged.

"Yeah, I can, but I never really do." Yang allowed. "At least, not anymore."

"Hmm, how do you decide your appearance?" Weiss asked. "Do you take after your parents, do they decide for you?" Weiss speculated, turning to meet Yang's lilac gaze.

"Bit of both really, depends on the parents." Yang explained. "Mom wanted me to look more like dad. It was only fair considering she wasn't the type to stick around." Yang's smile faded. "I used to change things however I felt, but in the end I chose to honor the face of my father, and the idea of my mother." Yang ran a hand through fiery locks.

Weiss closed the logbook, laying it on the counter and sliding her hands around Yang's arms. "They must be beautiful."

"Yeah...but not as beautiful as you." Yang murmured.

Weiss laughed. "Impossible, and cheesy. I can't compare to gods Yang."

"Of course you can, in ways we can only imitate." Yang caressed Weiss' cheek, planting a kiss on her forehead. "We make ourselves as we wish to be. Appearance can be as meaningful or meaningless as we desire...but humans?" Yang cupped Weiss' face with both hands. "You're born as you are, and can only hope for the best, making do with what nature gives you...and you Weiss, of all the humans I've met..." Yang pulled her into a kiss, short but no less searing. Weiss chased her warmth as it ended, but Yang held her firmly, smiling lovingly down into her eyes. "You are perfection to me."

Weiss' lip quivered, Yang allowed her to look down, taking a shaky breath, and leaning into Yang's warmth, burying her face in her chest. "My Sunlight."

Yang planted another kiss on her head. "My Snowball."

Following Velvet into the back room, Ruby found her fussing over a dressmaker's dummy, blocking it from view. "I found some lovely grey wolf pelt to trim it with. I think I was saving it for something special...I can't remember what, but oh well, what's more special than new friends?"

Velvet stood aside and Ruby gasped in wonder at the sight before her. "Beautiful!" Ruby whispered. "Oh, it's so fluffy!" She rushed forward, stroking the grey fur lining.

"Fluffy is always in style, come on, turn around and let's make sure it fits." Velvet unclipped the cloak from the dummy, and Ruby obeyed, bouncing on her heels as the thick garment was draped
around her neck and pinned in place. "There, how is it?"

"I love it!" Ruby chirped.

Velvet chuckled, turning her body towards a nearby standing mirror. "How does it look?"

Ruby beamed, looking at herself in the mirror, swirling the cloak about. It hung to just above her ankles, low enough to protect against the elements, but just short enough that it would not trail in said elements. "It's nice and warm, and soft! I love it! I'll take good care of it, I promise!" She spun around, wrapping Velvet in a tight hug.

"Ooph, gods you're strong." Velvet grunted. "I know you'll take good care of it, but you're bound to get into some trouble eventually." Velvet hugged her back, then bent down when her grip loosened. "It's okay if it gets damaged. It's a cloak, they're tough, but it'll wear and tear, and when it does, you bring it back here, okay?" Ruby nodded rapidly, excitedly grinning all the while. "Good girl, now." Velvet flipped the hood over Ruby's head, standing up straight. "Let's go show off to the others."

Ruby giggled, twirling around a few more times as Velvet left, before turning to follow. "Weiss, Yang, look it's done!" She yelled as Velvet pushed through the curtain, freezing at the sight before her.

Weiss and Yang were entwined, or rather, had been entwined, shocked out of their embrace by Ruby's outburst, but the evidence was there. Weiss' hand was buried in Yang's hair, Yang's hand cupping Weiss' cheek, which blushed, even as a gleeful grin spread across Yang's face. "Lookin' good Rubes! I think you pull it off better than Weissicle here." She pinched Weiss' cheek.

Weiss flushed even deeper, scowling. "Just because she's cute and adorable...I resign myself to looking dignified, and noble, and--"

"There's a hickey on your neck Weiss." Velvet smirked.

"What?!" Weiss squawked. "Where?" She pulled away from Yang, hurrying over to one of the standing mirrors, only to snarl in frustration when she was confronted by her own lack of reflection. "Fucking gods damnit Velvet!"

Ruby tilted her head in confusion. "What's a hickey?"

After Weiss had calmed down a few shades, she provided Velvet with a commission list. It included several hoods of varying shades, matching face scarves, and a leather overcoat. It was no simple overcoat either, complete with detailed sketches and diagrams, it seemed inspired by her elder sister's battlecoat, but less dressy, with knee length tails and tighter sleeves. Weiss stated her days of hunting in dresses and skirts were over, that her vanity could take a back seat in favor of practicality. Both Velvet and Yang seemed saddened by that.

With Yang laden down with a crate of empty cosmetic jars, the group made their way to Port's Forge, oddly empty and silent for once, yet no less sweltering, which was pleasant in the chilly weather. "Knock knock?!" Yang yelled as they entered. She jabbed her free hand into a nearby brazier with a contented sigh.

"I'll be but one moment!" Port's voice hollered from inside the building proper. Weiss pressed onward, reaching the partially open door and pushing it aside. The interior resembled Weiss' own office, only with far less paper and glass, and far more steel and wood. A myriad of tools and weaponry hung on various racks capped off with a minotaur head mounted above the hearth. Port
himself sat behind a table by the door. His workspace was smattered with various tools and objects, including a wheel of cheese and a bottle of mead. Currently his attention was trained on a magnifying glass, which focused on an ornate carved piece of silver. "I'm just finishing up and…"

He glanced up from his work. "Miss Schnee!" He burst.

"Hello Peter," Weiss greeted as the blacksmith rushed around the desk.

"It is a great relief to see you alive and well in person." Port grasped both of Weiss' hands in his own. "Ah, this is a familiar temperature. How are you adjusting to your state of being?"

"With some difficulty." Weiss admitted. "Thank you for donating to me. Truth be told I was surprised. I don't recall you speaking of vampires fondly, let alone of befriending one."

"I am sure I've mentioned Dr. Oobleck at least once, but it might have been brief." Port thought aloud. "Most of our interactions are brief after all." He laughed, releasing her. "And unlike him, you don't have students to feed off of, not that I particularly approve of such a method, but it is far more respectful than those ghastly monsters and their servants, bah!" He flung his hands up dismissively, just as Ruby poked her head around Weiss' back.

"Hello Mister Port!" Ruby chirped.

"Oh, hello there Little Ruby." Port greeted. "I believe I have something for you!"

"You do?" Ruby asked with anticipation.

"Yes, you too Miss Schnee." Port circled his table once more to reach the shelves and drawers behind it, opening one to pull forth two small bags. "I cast your new broach from platinum, it finally gave me use for the odd scraps I've collected." He dropped said bag in a shocked Weiss' hand.

"I didn't expect a replacement-" Weiss started.

"Consider it a welcome back gift." Port insisted. "Something so vital as your survival deserves celebration." He ended with a smile. Weiss opened the bag, pulling forth the newly forged broach, identical in every way to her silver one, which Ruby was pulling from her own bag, examining the newly scribed initials.

"Ruby Nikos, not entirely inaccurate." Port noted. "Summons are soulbound after all." He mused.

"Thank you Mister Port!" Ruby cheered.

"You're very welcome my dear." Port bowed.

"Would you tell me more about this Oobleck?" Weiss requested, replacing her temporary cloak pin with the new broach. "You say he feeds upon his students?"

"Yes indeed he does." Port sighed. "You see, my dear friend Oobleck is a scholar of some renown. Naturally this draws students and assistants. In exchange for knowledge they provide him sustenance."

"Oh, that seems...fair." Weiss managed. Truth be told, the idea had its appeal, at least now that she understood how it felt to feed. It was violating humans rights that sickened her, in addition to a simple fear of the alien, of losing more of herself to the curse. Thankfully that had not happened.

"Yes, that would indeed be the kindest term for it." Port allowed. "At the very least it's more
admirable than those monsters in Southern Atlas." Weiss shivered, reminded of the victimization that so scared her.

"What monsters?" Ruby asked innocently.

Weiss glanced at Ruby, then at Port, who seemed morose. She could not blame him. The subject had always been a dark one, drilled into her from a young age as something to be despised. "Vampires Ruby, the majority of which live in the Southern Atlas Mountain Range."

"They dug themselves in some centuries ago, and fought the Templars to a standstill, forcing them to strike a treaty." Port explained.

"They essentially exist as their own state." Weiss added. "Numerous covens and their human slave class."

"Slave class?" Ruby inquired.

Weiss sighed. "Even that is putting it lightly...Ruby, to most vampires, humans are a food source, first and foremost. They look down upon...them, as lesser beings, weaker, slower, easy to manipulate...there are many humans who seemingly agree with this belief themselves."

"But why?" Ruby pressed.

"Humanity has a tendency to seek out the strong for protection." Port noted. "Gods, soldiers, warriors, and seemingly greater beings. The world is a dangerous place, and the people wish to live peaceful lives."

"And vampire covens offer that peace, in exchange for their lives." Weiss said.

"So they stay with them as food?" Ruby asked.

"In part." Weiss confirmed. "Food, labor...other purposes..." She scowled. "There are entire families that have been living as human livestock for generations. They even breed us like cattle for the best taste, ugh." She sighed. "The idea is sound, but the stories, and what Glynda copied down for me are just...it's a sad way to live Ruby. It's something I wouldn't want to inflict upon anyone...if you ever start to feel like I'm using you..."

"You won't use me Weiss," Ruby soothed, wrapping Weiss in a hug. "You're my friend, and I'll support you as long as you let me."

Weiss chuckled, patting Ruby on the back. "Thank you Ruby."

"You fed upon Ruby?" Port questioned, surprised.

"It was experimental, and I am very fortunate it worked out." Weiss nodded.

"Fascinating!" Port exclaimed. "Oobleck would positively adore hearing this. Feeding upon an aspect! Revolutionary he would call it. I should really put you in touch with him..."

"Yes, but perhaps first you should update me on my commissions?" Weiss suggested.

"Right!" Port remembered. "Yes, well here I may have gotten a little ahead of myself. This is a portion of the sheath for Miss Scarlatina's dagger, which is currently with the others being silver plated." He pointed at another door. "Forging the daggers was child's play, but it would help to know how many you will need."
"Ultimately?" Weiss asked. "One for every household in Patch."

"Oh?" Port quirked his brow. "Arming the people. A noble idea, though stakes would have a more striking appeal to them…"

"Practicality Port." Weiss countered. "A stake is clumsy and heavy, a stiletto could be wielded by a child."

"You don't expect as much, do you?" Port pressed.

Weiss chuckled humorlessly. "Better to be safe than sorry."

After the visit to Port's, Weiss and Yang decided to return home, hugging Ruby farewell before she made her way out of town and towards the Templar encampment. It was only just passing midday, the grey sky calm, threatening little more than scattered showers. Ruby enjoyed the rain, the feeling of it pattering across her skin was soothing, and the cold did not bother her, but neither Pyrrha nor Glynda appreciated Ruby's soaked form walking through the house. So she rarely got to enjoy it to the extent she wished. The sky gave way to tree tops, and Ruby followed the rough forest path toward the encampment clearing, until the entrance checkpoint came into view, and with it…

"Hello friend Ruby!" Penny called, waving from beside the guard before rushing forward.

"Hello Penny!" Ruby managed before being swept off her feet. "Whoa!"

"I realized I did not hug you when last we parted." Penny explained. "And hugging is very important to close friendships!" She squeezed, and for the first time Ruby felt just a tiny bit of discomfort.

"I should have hugged you too!" Ruby squeaked. "I love hugs!"

Giggling, Penny released her, waving to the guard before taking Ruby's hand in her own and beginning down the path. Penny explained that Winter had informed her of Ruby's impending visit, and so she had asked General Ironwood for leave. Technically, she was to patrol the coastline near town, somewhat pointless, as plain-clothed Templars already kept an eye on it, but it was Ironwood's way of allowing her leave while maintaining an air of professionalism.

And so Ruby and Penny made their way back towards the town, chatting all the while. Their last meeting had been spent mainly talking about their creators, or in Ruby's case, summoner. According to Penny, her "Father", Professor Polendina, once had a daughter, flesh and blood. But after an unfortunate accident, she had been rendered braindead, and in a bid to save her life, Polendina had attempted to transfer her mind and spirit into an automaton control matrix. The experiment was a partial success. Penny awoke, and Polendina had been overjoyed, at least until Penny expressed confusion. She did not know where she was, who she was, or what she was, let alone who Polendina was. It seemed the process had wiped her of all memory. Ruby had sympathized, awaking for the first time to find your creator disappointed, not in your existence, but in the absence of another. For Penny it was worse, according to the professor. She sounded identical, and had here same upbeat attitude toward life, but she was not truly Penny. She was a new person, a second chance so to speak, and though her memories may be gone, her soul persevered.

And Penny intended to make the most of her existence, strange though it was.

"I think Miss Schnee is beginning to come around." Penny declared. "She seems kinder, more
respectful of my identity. She no longer seems uncomfortable when speaking with me."

"I feel the same." Ruby nodded. "She really didn't like me when we met. She said because she
didn't know what I was, she didn't trust me, and wanted me to stay away from Weiss. But I like
Weiss, and Weiss likes Winter, so I just tried to be nice to her too. I think it's working."

"Miss Schnee is a very...emotional individual." Penny observed.

"So is Weiss, but she tries not to show it." Ruby added.

"Very much like Miss Schnee." Penny noted.

"Maybe if Winter had a good friend, she'd be happier?" Ruby suggested.

"Perhaps, I could try, but most of her time is spent with General Ironwood." Penny explained.

"Is he Winter's friend?" Ruby asked.

Penny hesitated to respond. "Not to Miss Schnee's preference. General Ironwood is more of
a...mentor."

"Oh, like Glynda and Pyrrha!" Ruby exclaimed.

Penny hesitated once more. "Possibly."
As Ruby and Penny approached town, they began to encounter people again. Reactions varied, some who had not seen Penny before gaped, several children hid when Penny waved to them, and what few were already familiar with her appearance remained indifferent. Penny sighed. "I wish I were more humanoid. Father worked hard to create my form, my facial features especially, but still, people are uncomfortable."

"I think you look beautiful." Ruby admired, hugging Penny's arm. The automaton smiled, squeezing Ruby's hand.

"Thank you Ruby, you are the second to say so, and the first who was not Father." Penny observed. "You too are beautiful."

"Thank you!" Ruby giggled. "I don't think anyone has told me that yet."

"Really?" Penny balked. "But you are far more beautiful than I!" She exclaimed, halting to face her companion. "Your skin is smooth and unblemished, your hair shimmers, and your eyes make me...make me feel very odd, to be quite honest. I could even describe them as alluring. How have you not been described as beautiful until now?" Penny wondered, genuinely confused.

Ruby considered the question, thinking on all her prior interactions. The word seemed on the tip of her tongue quite often, for when confronted with something wondrous in existence, it truly felt correct to describe it as such. But when she looked in the mirror it never quite seemed to apply. She felt different. "Perhaps I'm not beautiful. Perhaps there is another word for me, one that has not come to mind, something comfortable...I don't know, but I don't' mind. I am what I am, and that's fine by me." She ended with a smile.

Penny smiled back, before her brow furrowed. "Ruby, do you feel appreciated?" She asked, turning to continue walking.

"I do." Ruby answered, following along. "Pyrrha is always thanking me for my actions, great and small, Blake tutors me, and expresses pride in my progress, and even Glynda likes it when I tend to her gardens." They approached the waterfront, and began walking along the docks. "I don't really have much to offer, but they don't seem to mind." Penny came to a stop, and Ruby turned to face her. "I'm just a new part of their lives, and I try to make the most of that." She ended, smiling fondly.

Penny mirrored Ruby's smile, though not without a twinge of sadness. "You are very fortunate Ruby." She admired, releasing her hand and walking to the dock's edge, gazing toward the horizon. "General Ironwood is noble. Dutiful, and respectful. He does try to make me feel welcome, respected, and that is more than I can say for most." She bowed her head. "Father...is a good man, a great man...but to him, no matter how much he may deny it...I am both a great success, and his
greatest failure." Penny knelt, staring at her reflection in the water. "When you look at your reflection, what do you see?" She questioned.

Ruby quirked her head, approaching to kneel beside her automated friend, and observe her own reflection in the rippling waters. "I look like myself." She observed, glancing at Penny's reflection.

"I don't." Penny murmured. "I lost my experiences, my memories of life with Father, but the one thing that stayed with me...was my face...so when I look at my reflection, I don't see myself." Her voice grew thick, and she laughed bitterly. "There are parts of me that know I should be able to cry, to breathe, to taste and smell and touch." She knelt back, holding her shaking robotic hands before her. "It came to me over time, the sensations of lost life, the deprivation of senses that I no longer have...these phantom sensations Father called them...echoes of an existence I have no memory of, but for my face." She shuddered, clenching her hands into fists, and laying them in her lap. "I apologize Ruby...I realize this is not a light hearted subject. I did not mean to burden you." She laughed hollowly. Penny saw, rather than felt her companion's hand wrap around one of her own.

"It's okay Penny." Ruby soothed, shuffling over to lean against her form. "I think sometimes people need to speak, but have no one they trust to listen. You can trust me to always listen, because you're my friend, and I care for you."

Penny laughed, genuinely this time. "Thank you Ruby. I just hate being a burden. I love helping people. I helped Father as much as I could but I could tell being around me made him sad, so I asked to help General Ironwood...and here I am...helping...but...I don't know Ruby. Now that I'm here, I just feel like...I don't think I belong with the Templars." She admitted in a whisper. "I don't feel appreciated. They look at me like any other automaton, a few say I'm their mascot, but I feel that trivializes my capabilities, well meaning though it may be. They don't take me seriously, when I have the same hopes and dreams they do. Or so I thought." She mused, looking out at the horizon once more.

"I take you seriously Penny." Ruby encouraged. "Maybe you need to find people who will appreciate you, like the Huntsman! Everyone loves Weiss for protecting them, she makes them feel safe."

Penny hummed, looking upward thoughtfully. "Do you really think I could be that? Looking the way I do?" She held her free hand up, the enameled steel glinting in the dull light.

"I-" Ruby started.

"E-excuse me." A timid voice came from behind. The pair turned to behold the young girl who had hugged Weiss - Bethany - her hands clasped nervously in front of her. "H-hi." She stammered.

"Hello there." Penny beamed, letting go of Ruby's hand so they could turn fully.

"Hello Bethany." Ruby greeted.

"I'm sorry, I didn't ask your name before." Bethany managed.

"That's okay, I'm Ruby." She said. "It's nice to meet you again."

Bethany smiled, looking to Penny. "Hi, w-who are you?"

"I'm Penny, Penny Polendina, it's a pleasure to meet you." She held out her hand, the smile remaining on her face even as Bethany flinched.

Eventually, glancing between Ruby and Penny, Bethany reached out to take the proffered limb,
shaking it, an expression of excited awe creeping onto her face. "Wow...what are you?" She wondered, edging forward to look at Penny closer.

"I'm not much different from you, truth be told." Penny replied. "I had an accident, and I need this body to live. Isn't it interesting?"

"An accident?" Bethany worried. "Are you okay?"

Penny giggled. "Yes Bethany, I am okay now. Fit as a fiddle." She reassured. "In fact...I'm here to help protect you."

"You are?" Bethany smiled.

"Yes." Penny proudly declared. "I am."

It occurred to Weiss that she and Yang had not spent any time alone together since their confession. Sure, Yang had spent time with Weiss in her office as she came down from the blood high, but afterwards she had been in no mental condition to do more than agonize over her immature and shameful actions. But that was behind them now. Weiss was calm and clear headed, and they were alone. So Weiss stopped, grabbing Yang's collar to pull her down into a long and indulgent kiss.

"Wow, that came out of nowhere." Yang joked when Weiss released her. "Been saving that up for me?"

"Who else would I save it for?" Weiss wondered aloud.

"I dunno', you seemed to be pretty cozy with Ruby for a bit last night." Yang teased. Weiss groaned, rolling her eyes as she continued to walk along the path to her home, Yang chuckling as she followed, the crate of jars she carried jangling with every step. "Come on, you know you just wanna' mush her cute 'wittle face and cover it in kisses!"

"That would be neither proper nor welcomed." Weiss huffed.

"Oh really?" Yang smirked. "I think Ruby would love it."

Weiss scoffed, her house coming into sight. "Ruby would love a smile from a banshee, Yang. The girl has no filter for affection."

"Hey, I knew a lovely banshee." Yang protested. "If they take care of their teeth, they don't look half bad."

"I'll be sure to keep that in mind should I ever encounter one that doesn't try to burst my eardrums." Weiss rolled her eyes.

"I find their songs soothing personally." Yang shrugged.

"Of course you do." Weiss laughed as they passed her garden. She would have to renew the wards again soon. Winter was not as adept with them as she was...it suddenly occurred to her how little magic she had performed in the past month, something she sorely needed to rectify, lest her ailing soul lose its familiarity.

"Something on your mind Snowball?" Yang asked.

Weiss held up her hand, flexing it, willing her soul to reach out, seeking the comfort of its familiar element. Gradually, an orb of whispery essence appeared in her palm, and she grinned. "I wasn't
sure if my connection would be so instinctual. With the state of my soul I feared it would be diminished, that I would require retraining...it's a relief." She allowed the energy to dissipate, clenching her fist. Then, in an instant, she flung her hand outward, willing a fresh burst from her fingertips, shards of ice flying through the air to embed themselves in distant trees.

Yang laughed, setting down the crate. "Cute snowflakes." She commented, conjuring a ball of flame. "How's your embers?"

"Pathetic, unfocused, barely more than flickers." Weiss lamented. "I've never had the temperament for flame. Ice on the other hand..." She clawed her hand, willing essence to coat it once more, until it was gloved in the substance. Weiss found that in spite of her hatred of the cold, her essence never chilled her. "It just feels...natural...if that makes any sense." She looked to Yang, to find an understanding smile.

"You had a rough life, didn't you?" Yang assumed, not incorrectly.

Weiss' smile dipped, and she shook her head. "Ever since my mother's death, every day has been a new trial. Everything just...seemed to go steeper downhill." She brushed past Yang, picking up the crate as she went.

"What was she like?" Yang asked. Weiss faltered, standing in front of the door. "If you don't mind me asking."

"It's...okay Yang...it was just...it was so long ago, I was barely more than a baby." Weiss opened the door, and Yang followed her inside, shutting it behind them and slipping into the fireplace, blazing a steady warmth throughout the room as Weiss set the crate on the table and removed her cloak. She paused at the coat hook, running her fingers over the fur lining. "When you...entered my dream, you hummed something. What was it?"

"I did...oh yeah, I did." Yang responded. "It's an old one, the Hymn of Light they called it."

"Who was they?" Weiss questioned.

"You'd call them Fire Cultists, but really they were just...devout worshipers of light that didn't differentiate, because there is no difference really." Yang replied. "The sun is the source of all mortal light, and it's just a big magic ball of flame. Taiyang, my father, technically."

"Cultists...your father is technically the sun?!!" Weiss balked. "I thought he was the Dragon God of Fire."

"The sun is his domain, a mortal manifestation of the Plains of Flame, his gift, his responsibility." Yang explained. "Wave next time you see it, maybe he's waving back." She chuckled. "And he is a dragon, when he wants to be...probably best not to mention them...especially being a former Templar and all."

Weiss winced. The extermination of the dragons was an old Templar tale. She had heard of it in sermons, in rousing speeches, propaganda...and once, in a distant memory, from her mother's own mouth, somber and reverent. Suddenly it hit her. "I think my mother was a Cultist. Or at least, was descended from them."

"Really?" Yang cheered. "That's awesome! Dad said they were really good people, holding sermons, performing rituals and all that good stuff. The people loved them...until the Templars cracked down on them." Yang wrinkled her nose in distaste. "Why can't they just live and let live?"

"Many reasons, all of them human." Weiss sighed, approaching the hearth to sit before it. Yang
reached from the flames, taking Weiss' hand in her own. She smiled, bringing it to her lips, savoring the warmth, even as a shiver threatened to run down her spine. She braced herself. "My father despises all that is not human." She murmured. "All that is unnatural, is a threat. Demon summoning is forbidden, magic should be used only for healing, protection, binding and banishment. In his sect even battle mages are banned...apparently he used to be more understanding, if only a little, but mother's death saw him grow more vehement in his hatred, which complicated things when Winter's magical talent began to show."

Weiss sighed. "Winter was devout, and vengeful. She knew mother better than I ever could, and wanted nothing more than to exterminate anything unnatural that she encountered...but under our father she would never be allowed to flourish. She would be a healer, a respected one, but it would be little more than a political position. So she appealed to General Ironwood, who publicly inducted her into his sect before father could stop her, so she could train as a Specialist. Father was so angry, and for a while so was I. My sister had left me without a word of warning, just impending distance, and suddenly she was gone. My brother, Whitley, kept asking why Winter had left, why father was so angry, and I had no answers, not at first, and when I did hear from her it was only in letter form. She was sorry, she didn't know what else to do, she needed to avenge our mother, and this was the only way she saw before her."

Weiss smiled sadly. "Young as I was, I couldn't argue against that, so there I remained. For years I rarely saw her, exchanging letters in secret. Winter's life was so exciting, she learned so much, became so powerful, every letter was a new adventure...and then my talents manifested."

Unclipping her purse, Weiss pulled forth several gold coins, which began to float in lazy circles above her palm. "Telekinesis is usually the first manifestation, in case you weren't aware, though almost anyone could learn with time and effort...those of us with natural affinity for casting tend to discover as much by accident."

Weiss grinned, chuckling. "Whitley frightened me in the manor library...one bookcase domino later and father had me under the tutelage of the Head Healer, just as Winter had once dreaded." She sighed, shaking her head. "Naturally I informed Winter as soon as possible." A wide grin broke out across her face. "She was so proud, and excited, but worried. What would I do with this power? She would never admit it, but she feared I would squander my potential. I had no intention of doing so, nor would I leave home. Instead I studied in secret.

"Winter provided me with guides, told me how she learned, the books she studied...I used to read them every moment I could, practice in my room. I mastered binding and banishment to appease my tutors, my healing was...passable, but it was combat that brought me joy...and that's how it all came apart. During a sparring session, I was taken off guard and in my panic...I nearly killed a girl, impaled her, with a spear of ice…"

"Oops." Yang interjected.

Weiss could not help but laugh. "Yes Yang, oops, though at the time it was more along the lines of 'oh my gods I killed a girl, I killed a girl and what happens now'...fortunately I did not kill her. She merely passed out from shock. Unfortunately, I had practiced forbidden offensive magic, tapped into foreign essence, and used it against a sworn sister, in attempted murder…” Weiss sighed.

Yang twitched, confused. "Attempted murder? It was an accident!"

"It was my word against the others, and I wasn't supposed to know how to weaponize my magic, let alone something so advanced, so practiced as an ice spear." Weiss continued. "A novice doesn't accidentally flinging something so effective. Obviously I had practiced, which meant I had broken the tenants. I had willingly, and with malicious intent, studied offensive magic and
actively practiced to the point where I could cause serious injury, so no, it didn't matter that it was accidental. The action was an admission of apostacism."

Weiss seethed, eyes filling with tears as the coins shuddered midair. "And when I was brought before my father...he..." She choked, the coins falling to the ground with a clatter. "H-he called me a disappointment, and had me locked in my room...I-I thought that was it, or I hoped, I didn't know what was going to happen next. For a week the only contact I had with the outside world were servants bringing me meals and taking my laundry...and then Winter, slipping into my room, ordering me to pack essentials. She said my life was in danger and we had to leave, so I scrambled, took everything of value, stuffed it into a bag and fled."

Weiss took a shuddering breath, swallowing, then with a tug, she pulled Yang from the fireplace, and huddled into her chest, shaking as Yang settled her arms around her. "Father had announced my violation of the tenants. I was to be put on trial, for attempted murder, and apostacism. It was just a formality...I would be found guilty...sentenced to...to perpetual house arrest, forced to wear a magic suppressing collar, that would kill me should I attempt to remove it...a-and...have my tongue cut out so that I couldn't utter curses against anyone...I...father and I had always been...distant...but...I-I never thought he'd...he...I just...how could his hatred corrupt him so deeply?" Weiss whimpered, hitching.

Yang ran her fingers through Weiss' hair, jaw squared, restraining herself from bursting into righteous flame. "Hatred is no excuse for such cruelty Weiss. A father should never condemn his child."
Chapter Summary

"Just a little taste...now, focus on your soul, and call forth the flame."

Pyrrha's day had been trying.
Pyrrha's week had been taxing.
Pyrrha's month had been draining.
And there was only so much Pyrrha could take before she began to break.
Pyrrha's life had never been simple, yet it had always seemed structured. Her childhood was spent training to fight and competing in tournaments. Her teenage years were spent training to be a Huntress, turning away from vain titles to a more noble cause, to protect the weak from the monstrous. When that ended in tragedy, it had taken time for Pyrrha to compose herself, mourning the loss of her friends, setting aside her spear and shield. She had turned to witchcraft, to serve people in other ways, hoping, selfishly, to right her wrongs through the power of magic.
No, never simple, yet always a routine. Wake, eat, study and train, sleep. Attend to duties as mentors saw fit, assist and protect the people.
And then Ruby came about, whether a genuine accident, or some divine price to be paid for her hubris, she had panicked, but composed herself, taking responsibility for her crime against nature. And she did not regret it, not one single bit. Ruby brought a light into her life that had been missing for years - companionship. A constant positive presence in her life. Ruby was there as she worked, smoothing the bumps in her process. She was there as she ran errands, filling her ears with enthusiasm and newfound knowledge. And Ruby was there as she slept, her small body curled into her arms. Pyrrha never truly realized how much she craved such a constant in her life, but Ruby had opened her eyes.
Only to be scared of what she saw.
The potential for loss once more burned like a brand in the back of Pyrrha's mind, images of the past haunting her, taunting her - Weiss' lifeless body, gaunt and pale, Yang frozen and shivering on the floor, Coral cradling Helia...Jaune's lifeless, glassy gaze...Ruby…
"Pyrrha?" Ruby's voice cut in, jerking Pyrrha from the restless doze she had managed. Ruby had come home later than expected, showing off her new cloak, and Weiss' broach, which Port had re-inscribed for her. After a day trapped in her own mind, Ruby's enthusiasm and joy was a sorely needed distraction for Pyrrha. It had lasted throughout dinner, and until they retired. Ruby had been delving into more and more books as time went on, hungry for knowledge, but unwilling to inconvenience Pyrrha, she donned a pair of enchanted glasses, and read in the dark. It seemed that in spite of this distraction, Ruby had noticed Pyrrha's restless mind. "Pyrrha, what's wrong?"
Pyrrha felt Ruby shift, the sound of the book shutting, and the weight of a hand upon her shoulder.
"Just a bad dream, I'm okay Ruby." She lied, rolling over to face her summon. Not that she could see well in the dark. At least Ruby could look at her, plastered smile and all.

"Pyrrha..." Ruby started quietly. Pyrrha flinched as fingers made contact with her cheeks. They felt wet. "Human emotions can be overwhelming...we cry when we feel pain, sometimes physical, sometimes emotional...Pyrrha, you're in pain." Pyrrha felt a lump grow in her throat, she struggled to swallow it, but when Ruby snuggled closer, it burst forth as a strangled sob. "It's okay to be sad Pyrrha...but seeing you sad makes me sad too. I wanna' make you happy, I wanna' help." Ruby whispered shakily.

Pyrrha felt a surge of guilt within her being. She did not want Ruby to suffer this, she wanted Ruby to be carefree. It was bad enough that she had trained her to fight. The image of Ruby squaring off against a Beowolf terrified her, the thought of an Ursa chilled her to the bone. Reaching out, Pyrrha wrapped her arms tightly around Ruby's form, pulling her ever closer, her fit perfect in her arms, the feel of her heartbeat calming, however slight. "I'm afraid." She admitted.

"Of what?" Ruby asked.

"Of losing you...of losing all of you...because I can't protect you." Pyrrha replied.

"But you're an amazing fighter." Ruby countered.

"I'm a human Ruby." Pyrrha took a shaky breath. "For all my prowess with a sword, Weiss swatted me aside like a child. A Beowolf I can handle, and an Ursa if I am prepared and lucky, but if I have to face Cinder I won't stand a chance, yet I feel compelled to do so, to protect you, to protect all of you, because if I don't try, and Cinder harms any of you..." Pyrrha swallowed. "...I will never be able to forgive myself."

"You don't have to protect us Pyrrha." Ruby soothed. "Weiss is strong, and growing stronger. Yang is a goddess of fire, you've taught me to protect myself!"

"I know, I know, and I have taught you...to the best of my ability, and I am so proud of how far you have come." Pyrrha smiled, planting a kiss on Ruby's hair. "But there will come a day when you face something you cannot defend against...and the thought of that day horrifies me...I-I don't want to bury another one of my friends." She choked, shaking.

"If that day ever comes, I promise Pyrrha, I promise I'll run." Ruby insisted. "But I won't leave you, and I'll make the others run too!"

"You can't promise that Ruby, it's not your choice." Pyrrha bit. "We humans are stubborn. We swear our lives away for the safety of others. We do not falter, we do not back down until we cannot stand any longer...you can't tell me you could drag Weiss away from battle."

"I could try." Ruby suggested.

"I know, but you would fail...we all fail someday...I just hope that isn't any time soon." Pyrrha planted another kiss on Ruby's forehead. "You give my life color Ruby." She admired, voice slurring. "I want to admire it for as long as possible."

Ruby lay silent in Pyrrha's embrace, listening to her heartbeat calm and slow, the turmoil soothing from her being. It pained her to hear such fears from her mistress, to know nothing could be done to truly halt them, that her past might ail her forever, a constant terror clinging to her every waking moment. Pyrrha was right, it would happen someday. And all they could do was hope for the best, and prepare for the worst. Ruby could only hope that whatever happened, they could survive it.
That whatever happened, she would make Pyrrha happy again.

Weiss never liked to dwell upon her pain. And yet she had a tendency to sit on a feeling, mulling it over in her mind, what had caused it, why it was stuck there, what could be done to make it go away. The answers were never clear. She did not know why her father treated her so, she did not know how to stop it, and after years of bearing the weight of his disapproving gaze, bowing to his every whim, running herself ragged keeping up with his expected workload, she simply learned to swallow her agony, holding her head high no matter how torturous it may seem. It was easier after all, to simply pretend nothing was wrong, than to admit everything was, and be unable to do anything about it.

"Hey, you don't have a block of chocolate but...oh, experimenting are we?" Yang queried as she walked into the bedroom, a mug of cocoa in hand.

Weiss had been lazing on her bed, distracting herself with attempts to summon a steady flame. Winter had, on occasion, effortlessly flung fire as Weiss did ice. It was awe-inspiring. Once she could manage a small one, enough to light a candle perhaps, before flickering out. Now her grasp of the element seemed even more erratic and unstable than ever. It was a frustrating challenge, one she welcomed.

"Just...trying." Weiss sighed. "I'm either out of practice or perhaps my soul really is struggling," She groused, letting her hands drop. She sighed as the bed dipped down beside her. "I just...it's always frustrated me. Winter can conjure flames in her sleep. I can be angry, everyone says I get angry too easily!" Yang huffed a chuckle, and Weiss opened her eyes to glare up at the smirking aspect.

"It's not just anger that draws the flame Weiss, hell, it's not purely emotion at all, it's...mindset." Yang held out the cup of cocoa, and Weiss relented, pushing herself up on one arm to take it.

"Thank you." Weiss murmured, taking a sip, and savoring the heat as it journeyed down into her stomach. "What do you mean, mindset?"

"It's as you said, a temperament thing, but not literally temper." Yang grimaced, looking away. "Weiss...you're depressed." She sighed.

"I know." Weiss whispered, taking another sip of cocoa. "I don't know what to do about it." She lamented, meeting Yang's gaze. The aspect's smile, tinged with sadness though it was, still warmed Weiss' heart, which leapt when Yang reached out to cup her cheek.

"It has no cure, like any sickness, it breeds in certain conditions, and wanes in others." With her free hand, Yang gestured for the cup. Weiss took a larger gulp before obeying, watching as Yang placed it on her bedside table. "You've spent your life struggling, blow after blow raining down, and yet you kept moving forward. That is why ice comes so naturally, it fits your temperament, you live it, so it bends to your will...fire demands...something...more violent. Winter? She's driven
by vengeance. She took the grief of your mother's passing and turned it into a passion for justice. That fire burned within her, breeding an attraction to the flame. Ask her how she feels when she embraces it. I bet she'll turn bright red, and not with anger." She smirked, allowing Weiss to clutch her hand with both her own.

"So what, I need to be more like Winter?" Weiss snarked. "It's not like I have any other inspirations in life…"

"No, you need to be yourself." Yang groaned, pulling Weiss into her lap with a yelp. "Winter is Winter, you'll never be her, and you shouldn't try." Taking Weiss' hands in her own, she turned her palms upward. "I didn't fall in love with Winter. I fell in love with Weiss, newborn vampire, Huntress, cosmetic manufacturer." She ended with a peck beneath the ear.

Weiss felt her heart swell, and her eyes sting. "You're going to make me cry." She whimpered.

Yang chuckled. "Hey, wanna' know a secret?" She whispered.

"I don't know." Weiss murmured. "Is it a happy secret or a sad secret?"

"It'll help with your fire." Yang promised.

"Oh?" Weiss quirked her brow.

"Hmm." Yang traced circles on the back of Weiss' hand. "Remember when you had the nightmare, and I stepped in?"

Weiss shivered at the thought, reminding herself that the pressure at her back was warm and soft, not cold and hard. "I do."

"Well, to do that, I had to...piggyback, on your soul, to follow you to the dreaming realm." Yang admitted.

"That's...understandable, and I'm thankful you did so." Weiss said.

"So am I...but...I was a little rough when I did it." Yang noted. "You were calling out, so I did it as fast as possible, and in the process I kinda' left an...imprint. No, that's not right...I guess you could say I rubbed off on you. There's a little bit of my essence hanging around your soul, and it's not going away."

"Oh, why?" Weiss asked.

"Who knows?" Yang shrugged. "Maybe I'm infectious, maybe I'm slowly taking you over, or maybe your soul is just fond of me." She teased. "But the point is, you've got a little bit of me inside you, and it's probably manifested in a few subtle ways, like...candles flickering near you, some internal warmth, and your unstable connection to flame. Your soul is confused, it's reaching out, but it's not sure which direction to go, the plane of flame, or my essence."

Weiss nodded, staring at her hands. "So how do we fix that?"

"We teach your soul to use my essence as a conduit." Yang replied. "Instead of reaching out by itself, this'll help train your affinity with flame, and reduce the strain by relying on my little tumor."

"Tumor, now there's a word for you." Weiss smirked.

Yang laughed. "I totally grew on you."
"Quite...so how do we do this?" Weiss enquired.

"With your permission, I'll reach out to your soul and bridge the gap, then we'll practice some channelling." Yang explained.

"With my permission?" Weiss asked.

"It's not very polite to assume you can jump onto someone's soul." Yang grinned. "I know it was to help you, but your soul wasn't very happy about it last time...I think that's why the nightmare ended the way it did." Weiss flinched, a shudder running down her spine at yet another unpleasant memory. "I'm sorry."

"I forgive you...you were trying to help, and I'd rather suffer that than endure any more of...let's just do this." Weiss refocused. "You have my consent."

Yang strengthened her grip on Weiss' hands, threading their fingers together. "I love you, Weiss Schnee." She purred.

"And I love you, Yang..." Weiss responded, somewhat awkwardly.

Yang chuckled. "Right, I never told you my full name, did I?"

"I imagine only Ruby knows." Weiss suggested.

"For good reason...aspects like me can only be summoned by those who know our names...I don't know when or how mine was discovered, but it's been causing me pain for...a very long time."

"You don't have to tell me Yang." Weiss soothed.

"I know I don't." Yang declared. "It's my choice, for the first time in all my existence, I choose to give you my name Weiss Schnee, for I am Yang Xiao-Long, Daughter of Taiyang, Dragon God of Fire, and I trust you will keep it safe."

"Yang...Xiao-Long...beautiful-ah!" Weiss started, and with that, a wave of heat burst within her form. She gasped, convulsing.

"Shhhhh it's okay, it's just me, focus on my voice." Yang's distorted voice spoke. But Weiss felt her own jaw move, hot air vibrating her throat.

"It's hard not to, i-it's hot, really hot!" Weiss stammered in response, breathing heavily.

Weiss felt Yang laugh. "It's pretty cozy in here." She admired.

"Are you possessing me?" Weiss asked, an edge of fear on her tongue. She felt a pang of guilt that was not her own.

"Not exactly." Yang answered. "Possessing would overpower your soul entirely, I'm just...taking a stroll. You could force me out any time, and I would let you. It won't take offense if this is too much."

"No-no it's okay it's just...disorienting...it's...I think I can feel your emotions." Weiss struggled.

"Well, are we more than our souls?" Yang asked teasingly. "Hey...how does this feel..."

"What,fe-oh!" Weiss gasped as a wave of tingles flowed through her body, leaving her reeling. She felt as if she were floating. "W-what was that?"
"Just a little taste...now, focus on your soul, and call forth the flame." Yang instructed.

Weiss' hands rose, whether of her own accord or Yang's she did not know or care, but she obeyed, slowing her breath, closing her eyes and focusing, envisioning the flame in her mind's eye, smirking back at her, crimson eyes glowing in the darkness. A wave of heat grew from her core, flowing through her body, circulating, pulsating, invigorating. She felt a laugh bubble from within her throat, distorted yet her own.

"Open your eyes Snowball." Yang giggled.

When Weiss did so the sight took her breath away. "My gods." A perfect ball of flame floated between her hands, larger and more vibrant than she had ever seen. It was so beautiful, swirling with power, little arcs flickering outward before being reabsorbed.

"I'd ask how it feels but I already know." Yang smugly stated.

Weiss laughed breathlessly, still staring at the summoned flame. It lit up the room intensely. It should have blinded her, as Winter's had on the occasion that she demonstrated it, but she could see it clear as day, orange and red and yellow, ringed in white. "It's euphoric." She shivered at the word as yet another wave of tingles swept through her form. Her focus slipped for but a moment, and the fireball escaped her grip, smashing into the carpet and setting it alight.

"Oh shit sorry!" Yang yelled.

With one of the most alien sensations Weiss had ever experienced, the aspect withdrew from her form. She shuddered at the feeling, as if she had been drained, but at the same time, a part was returned to her. "It's fine, it's fine!" Weiss shook herself, making a fist and calling forth the familiar feeling of cold until mist formed, and flung her hand outward, carpeting the flames in frost. Pausing for a moment, all was silent.

"Sunk!" Yang snickered. "Oops."
"You've been practicing, haven't you?"

"Oops?" Weiss balked, turning to Yang, who bit her lip. "I-I...I..." Weiss laughed, gesturing vaguely with her hand. "I did it, I did it!"

"You did it." Yang managed, giggles escaping as Weiss grinned. "Whoosh!"

"I did it, I summoned a fireball, I-I did it a-and I set fire to the rug but I did it, I did it!" Weiss gushed, hands shaking before her like an excited child. Yang was laughing openly at the sight, barely reacting when Weiss tackled her. "Thank you! Thank you, thank you, thank you! I love you Yang Xiao-Long!" She squealed, before pushing a kiss onto the aspect, who finally stopped laughing to kiss her back, or tried to, barely lasting a few seconds before snickering again. Weiss was left straddling the prone goddess as she dissolved into another laughing fit. "It's not that funny!" Weiss whined.

Yang shook her head. "I-I made you whoosh, ahahahah!" She managed before succumbing once more.

Weiss huffed, thinking of the shiver that had thrown her off...a familiar heat became evident, and she grinned. "Well then." She leaned down, grasping Yang's hands and pinning them above her head. Yang gasped, gaping and grinning up at her. "Why don't you make me whoosh for real?" Weiss purred. Yang flushed red, lips pressing together. For a brief moment Weiss smirked, only to scowl as Yang burst into yet more laughter. "Oh forget it!" Weiss shrieked as she found herself flipped, Yang looming over her.

"Oh, I thought you'd never ask." Yang grinned.

"Yang mng!" Weiss was smothered by Yang's lips on her own. She could barely mount a defense as they covered every inch with piping hot kisses. She gasped when Yang bit down lightly on her lip, squeezing her hands and giggling.

"You're so responsive." Yang purred against Weiss' chin as she slowly journeyed down her throat. "So full of life...your skin is so soft and pure...and you're so warm Weiss." And it was the truth. Weiss was indeed still warm, her heart beat steadily, for a vampire at least, calmed though it may be from her feeding, blood still thrummed strong beneath the skin Yang worshiped, trailing kisses along her collar, and reaching her shirt. "Hmm, this is in my way." Yang hummed, planting a teasing kiss against the first button of Weiss' top.

"Then take it off!" Weiss growled down, meeting Yang's playful gaze.

So Yang did, with her teeth, button by button as Weiss gaped at her. Yang never broke eye contact, relishing the deepening flush of Weiss' perfect face as she slowly destroyed the garment, which split apart to reveal a lacy white brazier.
"You humans and your barriers, I think we should institute a no underwear rule!" Yang growled, tearing the delicate fabric apart, revealing Weiss' modest bust, which rose and fell with her quickening breaths. "And you call me a goddess..." Yang grinned, leaning down to plant a kiss upon one rosy red nipple, her hot lips enveloping the sensitive nub entirely. Weiss let her head drop with a strained moan, Yang's ministrations spreading around the flesh of her breast, covering its surface with searing affection, before switching, coaxing yet more whimper and moan from the pent up vampire. "Don't resist Snowball." Yang murmured, planting a kiss between her lover's mounds. "I like the sounds you make."

With a nibble, Weiss groaned, kicking her legs and bucking. "Stop teasing!" She whined. Yang chuckled, sliding her fingers from between Weiss', lightly clawing down her arms as she shifted lower. To credit Weiss, her hands remained in place, embedding themselves in one of the silk-covered pillows, bracing herself as Yang settled on the hem of her skirt.

"I kinda' like a little clothing, spices things up, makes it seem rougher, but these..." Yang's hands dropped to the thick woolen tights Weiss wore. "I'll have to replace these too...but first." Yang dipped beneath Weiss' skirt and pushed her face between her legs. Weiss yelped at the sudden warmth and pressure, then shivered upon hearing Yang breathe in. "Mmmm, you smell amazing...oh, Snowball, you're melting." Yang teased, and with a rough tug, Weiss felt her tear the material apart. Weiss resisted the urge to wrap her legs around Yang's head as hot breath ghosted across her exposed, sodden underwear, warmth surging through her nethers at the exposure. "Oh dear, another pesky obstacle." Yang smirked, leaning in to plant a kiss on the matching lace...and run her tongue across its surface.

"Y-Yaaaaang!" Weiss keened, pulling the pillow over her head.

"It's so beautiful down here Weiss, I wish you could join me, but I don't think you're that flexible." Yang giggled, planting another kiss on Weiss' inner thigh.

"Pwwph." Weiss' muffled voice whined through the pillow.

"What's that Snowball?" Yang grinned, pecking the opposite thigh, which twitched as she nibbled on the sensitive flesh.

Weiss slid the pillow upward to hiss at Yang. "Stop teasing me you glorified nightlight uagh!" She arched as in one movement, Yang pulled aside the soaked garment and ran her tongue along the full length of Weiss' core, lingering on the bundle of nerves at its tip. Yang shivered at the unfettered sweetness and relished in the choked whine with which Weiss rewarded her. Weiss had never experienced anything like this, no human could compare, especially no inexperienced servant girls. Yang's tongue almost stung from its temperature, but Weiss knew no harm would come to her, and relished in the sheer heat running along her most sensitive lips, every inch covered in her lover's adoration, every movement coaxing whimper and moan from the convulsing vampire, and then the tongue journeyed inward, plunging into her depths, lavishing them in increasingly deeper affections, but never straying from her delicate bud for long.

"Ah...Yang...hah!" Weiss gasped as a weak spot was brushed within her. She knew herself very well. Loneliness had fostered a healthy self-love life, and Yang was honing in on her weakest points and exploiting them with reckless precision. It was impossible, it was maddening...it was stopping, leaving Weiss with an ache in her core, barely smoothed by an apologetic kiss. "Yang what..." Weiss half questioned, feeling the weight between her legs shift, until the pillow was removed to reveal Yang once more kneeling tall before her, bare of all clothing, sun kissed skin, gentle motherly curves, and bountiful breasts on display for her guiltless pleasure.
"You're delicious." Yang smirked, licking her lips. She leaned down to plant a kiss on Weiss once more, one hand braced beside her head, the other gently stroking her breast, then warm flesh made contact with her core, and she whimpered. "I wanted to ask instead of assuming...which you preferred, oral..." Yang shifted, and the warmth thrust along her slit. Weiss froze. "Or otherwise."

"I-is that a..." Weiss reached down, pulling up her skirt to reveal the warmth in question, between her legs, jutting from Yang's pelvis was a human phallus, modest in size. "O-oh...wow." Weiss whimpered.

"I may have found...a certain something while cleaning...do you like it?" Yang asked. Weiss could only gape, but managed a little nod. "Is this what you want? I don't mind either way...but I will admit this is more enjoyable for both of us."

"I've never...had a real one before." Weiss admitted.

Yang knelt back, and Weiss sat up, reaching for the offered length. It twitched when her fingers made contact, and they giggled. "They're twitchy things...and ticklish." Yang said, far too casually for Weiss to handle. She laughed, gently examining the member, tracing it down to the stem, Unlike a typical human, Yang lacked testicles, and her...'normal' genitalia still existed beneath, engorged and pink, perfect, like the rest of her, but lacking a clitoris...oh.

"It's...strangely...beautiful." Weiss managed.

Yang chuckled, reaching up to cup Weiss' cheek, pulling her into another kiss. "No one's described it like that before...some men cut the skin, I don't know what form you prefer...I can also do other species...if you're curious." Yang had to hold in a giggle at the flickering reaction to that, confusion, realization, shock and amusement, then a tint of embarrassment.

"No, no this is fine, more than fine, it's perfect." Weiss laughed nervously, leaning in to hide her face in Yang's shoulder, warm arms wrapped around her.

"No pressure...no judgement, never be afraid to try something new...I've never been with a vampire before." Yang soothed.

"Were you often summoned for this?" Weiss questioned.

"Hah, I wish." Yang laughed humorlessly. "But don't think about that, think about us...I live to serve you Weiss." She punctuated the vow with a peck on the shoulder.

Weiss felt a surge of affection, in addition to the arousal still clinging to her nethers like a haze. "Lay down on the pillows." She instructed, pulling back.

Yang obeyed, crawling past and flipping over, the still rigid flesh bobbing about as she did so. She lay there, bared for Weiss entirely. It felt unfair. "No keep the shirt on!" Yang reached out as Weiss moved to shrug it off. "It's silly but, it's really alluring...the skirt can go if you wish though..."

Weiss swore Yang almost tinted a darker shade at the request, but she found herself crawling forward, tights, skirt and shirt in place. Yang was right, the present clothing made her feel...messy, roughened. Atlesian society had its share of conservatives and deviants, but Weiss expected even the latter might not conjure the visage before her, a fire goddess, prone, offering flesh for her pleasure, and hers alone.

"I've always wanted to do this." Weiss admitted, lying between Yang's legs, grasping the length in her hand. "I just never would have thought it would be like this...if I do something wrong-"
"You won't hurt me Weiss, just do whatever feels natural, practice makes perfect." Yang encouraged.

Weiss scoffed at the word. "I never thought anything could be perfect...until I met you." She started with a kiss, planted at the base of the shaft.

Yang giggled. "There you go." Her gently voice purred. "It all feels good." Weiss took that tidbit to heart, pecking along her length. Yang gazed at her lovingly, her breathing growing heavier. Weiss paused as she reached the tip, meeting Yang's eye. She smirked, planting a lingering kiss before ducking down, savoring the satisfied groan Yang released as she ran her tongue all the way back up. "Noooww you've got it."

Weiss giggled as she suckled on a particular spot, switching between kissing and licking around until she was certain most of the member had been covered then gave one last languid lick along the length, met Yang's smoldering gaze, and lowered her mouth over the tip.

"Slowly...oh...oh." Yang tried to warn before gasping as Weiss slowly took up the entire phallus, her nose touching Yang's small patch of pubic hair before she withdrew, gulping in air.

"I did it!" Weiss gushed, beaming with pride.

"You've been practicing, haven't you?" Yang teased.

Weiss barely blushed as she crawled over Yang, catching her lips in a long and sensual kiss. "A girl gets curious..." She trailed off. Looking down, her core hovered over Yang's sex, so she lowered herself, rubbing against the warm length.

"How are you feeling?" Yang probed.

Weiss kissed her again. "Good, alive...I love you." She paused, to wrap her arms around Yang's neck, leaning their foreheads against one another.

"At your pace." Yang murmured as she laid her hands upon Weiss' hips.

"I love you Yang Xiao-Long." Weiss whispered, positioning herself above Yang's tip.

"And I love you Weiss Schnee." Yang responded.

And with that, Weiss sunk down upon the length, gasping as she was slowly filled by the heated flesh for the first time. It was at once familiar and alien. Her prior substitutes were warmed only by artificial means. Yang was, as expected, just shy of a painful temperature, and soft, giving in just the right way, twitching at the stimulation of her silky walls. Weiss slumped as Yang fully hilted within her, stilling to take in the new sensation.

"Mmmm, there's no feeling quite like this." Yang sighed in bliss, planting kisses along Weiss' arm.

"It's so hot...I love it." Weiss admitted, shifting her hips just a little, testing the feeling. The shocks of pleasure that ran along her spine made her legs weak. She scoffed. "Perhaps this position wasn't the best decision."

"But does it make you feel in control?" Yang asked.

Weiss pulled back, looking Yang in the eye. "It does...but...I don't mind giving you control...I am yours Yang, I trust you, I love you." Weiss reassured, pecking her lover on the lips.
"I love you too...hold on tight." Yang grinned, flipping them over.

Weiss yelped as the warmth within her shifted, then withdrew. "Hah Yang!"

Weiss moaned as Yang sheathed herself once more, wrapping her legs weakly around the aspect's waist, clinging as she began to slowly thrust, each impact drawing a squeak or whimper, the likes of which only incensed Yang, gradually increasing the speed of her pumping. Pushing Weiss down, Yang bit a trail of love down her throat, which hummed with whines as Weiss lost herself to bliss, hands clawing at Yang's flest in a desperate attempt to ground herself. Heated nails raked across Weiss' chest, embedding themselves in the supple softness of her breasts, drawing louder exclamations of passion. Weiss was barely able to sob. Yang lost herself in the heavenly feeling of approaching climax, her thrusts slowing, increasing in power. Weiss broke first, eyes bulging as the first wave hit, mouth gaping in a choked, but silent howl. Yang continued to thrust into her stricken partner until she too drove herself over the edge, laughing joyfully as euphoria wracked her form, releasing her physical essence into Weiss' core, until finally she slumped, panting, grinning down at her recovering love.

"You look so beautiful like this." Yang admired breathlessly. Weiss whimpered, and Yang finally noticed her fingers still clawing at her breasts, and released them. "Oh shit sorry!" She gasped. Her nails had cut through the flesh, small crimson crescents remaining.

"Huh?" Weiss slurred, craning her neck down to glance at the wounds. "Oh...s'right...they'll heal...are you okay?"

Yang laughed at that, leaning down to brush a kiss against her lover's lips. "I'm better than okay. I feel amazing...you feeling drained?"

"No, no just..." Weiss cleared her throat, shaking her head and blinking several times before focusing on Yang. "I just felt hazy, light and...I feel really good now." She pushed herself onto her elbows, flinching as her pelvis shifted. "Oh gods...are you still hard?"

"Yeah!" Yang cheered. "Would you like me not to be?"

"No...actually I think I can go again." Weiss bit her lip, staring up at Yang through lidded eyes. "Unless you're tired already?"

Yang laughed, thrusting suddenly, using Weiss' moment of weakness to push her back down flat. She leaned down, drawing Weiss into a kiss, relishing the slowness, the gentleness of Weiss' lips sliding over her own, the feel of their tongues brushing against one another, before breaking away. "I'll always have energy for you...my sweet little Snowball."

At the crack of dawn, birds were barely stirring in their nests, wolves hardly leaving their dens, and yet Weiss was already training. It seemed her excess of energy had not been drained from the vicious lovemaking that dominated the night. The act itself seemed taxing, but after the fact recovery was near instant, and so she decided it was time to adapt to her newfound reflexes in more than combat.

Setting out in the early morning, Weiss and Yang had arrived at the restored training ground as the grey sky began to brighten. It seemed her excess of energy had not been drained from the vicious lovemaking that dominated the night. The act itself seemed taxing, but after the fact recovery was near instant, and so she decided it was time to adapt to her newfound reflexes in more than combat.
Weiss began with her familiar fitness routine. Normally it was not so vigorous as her Templar days, with her Huntress duties taking up the slack, but today she reverted to her old ways, and once again found herself lacking in fatigue. Pushups, situps, stretches, light acrobatics, even her long past ballet routine were effortless, her balance nearly flawless. Traversing the obstacle course continued to provide no meaningful challenge. Indeed she felt like an adult playing on children's equipment, fruitless, a waste of her time. At least the bars were enjoyable to swing from.

Pyrrha and Ruby arrived not long after, the latter gleefully joining Weiss in another sparring session, while Yang and Pyrrha once again watched from the sidelines as they fought for dominance. This time both freely used their essences, Weiss dodging Ruby's tendrils, at one point freezing them mid air. They all gasped as they shattered, then gaped as they melted and reformed, Ruby using the distraction to trip Weiss over, much to her frustration.

Eventually Ruby joined Pyrrha in her own drills and Weiss elected to practice her spellcasting, forming and hurling ice spears at the rough targets and trees bordering the southern edge of the field. Though still seemingly proficient in their usage, it never hurt to ensure they were as instinctive as possible, to the point where she could use them even in a blind panic. Even the most seasoned Huntress could fall victim to such a state, and even with her newfound strength and durability, she would rather not risk a Grimm besting her by surprise. Eternal life with an artificial limb would be tiresome.
Chapter Summary

"It's not as large as last night."

Just as Weiss was about to begin practicing with fire, Blake appeared from the shadows, greeting them as warmly as possible from such an aspect, before whisking Ruby away to practice her essence manipulation. Left alone, Pyrrha elected to drill her own preferred element, electricity. Though commonly manifesting in lightning and shock magic, electricity had a variety of uses, acting as a base for many kinds of spellcasting. Everything from simple transfiguration to complex rituals relied on channeling electricity, and it flowed through Pyrrha like a river. It made her day-to-day casting easier, but her favored use was polarity manipulation, which she demonstrated by lifting a series of solid metallic orbs from her pack.

Weiss had only seen Pyrrha practice on a few occasions, each of them equally mesmerizing. Her arms flowed like water, gently guiding the orbs about in a dance-like routine, punctuated by several sharper movements as she transitioned between acts. Pyrrha had explained it was an old Mistrali routine, created by Chi practitioners who had considered polarity to be the governing force in life, representing balance and harmony, equal pull, equal push. Weiss was not sure if she cared for the implications of such a belief, but the routine itself offered a glimpse of a fascinating culture, and in truth, it made her envious. Pyrrha looked so calm, so serene, eyes closed, face blank, the very picture of perfection in Weiss' eyes. She envied Pyrrha's focus, when she could hardly focus on four objects with her kinesis, let alone a dozen iron balls.

"Hey." Yang's voice shook Weiss from her admiration, along with a warm hand on her shoulder. "Sizing up your next target?" She snarked.

Weiss scoffed, laying her own hand upon Yang's, turning to peck her on the cheek. "Hardly. It's healthy to admire your peers."

"Mmm, I'd do more than admire her…" Yang drawled.

"Oh?" Weiss huffed. "And here you are accusing me of planning ahead."

"Wouldn't it be exciting, inviting her into our bed?" Yang suggested. "She's so innocent, I bet she's barely been kissed before."

"You presume much of me Yang." Weiss said.

"Am I wrong?" Yang challenged. Weiss merely rolled her eyes, refusing to respond either way. Instead she held her hand aloft, took a deep breath, focused on the sensation Yang had inspired within her, and tapped into the essence of flame. "Hey that's pretty good." Yang admired as a moderately sized ball of flame appeared in Weiss' hand.

Weiss grinned, pulling away to cup her hands beneath the summoned light. "It's not as large as last night." Weiss observed.
Yang snickered. "That's because your connection is still fledgling. Give it time and practice, like anything else." Weiss hummed, passing the flame between her hands, gaining a feel for the element, leaving it in her left, taking aim at one of the battered wooden dummies and hurling it at the target...which promptly exploded. "Oops." Yang snorted.

"Was that intentional?" Pyrrha's worried voice called.

Weiss turned with a tight smile to see the orbs scattered about, the explosion having broken her friend's concentration. "Sorry Pyrrha, I'm new to this element." Pyrrha merely nodded, gesturing the orbs into the air and resuming routine. Looking to Ruby and Blake saw the former offering a thumbs up, the latter shook with suppressed laughter. Weiss huffed.

"Well hey, look at the bright side." Yang giggled. "Cinder's not gonna' survive one of those." She observed, walking over to the singed and smoking crater.

"If we can find her." Weiss sighed. "Otherwise I could burn the forest down for all the good it would be." She conjured another ball of flame.

"We'll find her, eventually...I think we need to try something new though." Yang soothed, kicking at what remained of the dummy post. "Ren and Nora were tracking Cinder via scent and rumors, but that isn't working out anymore. The Templars are making a ruckus that anyone could avoid, and I wasn't exactly subtle either. We need to bait her out somehow."

"The only thing that comes to mind is transport." Weiss shrugged. "With the Templars guarding the port she'll be looking for other avenues of escape...unless she can teleport..." She trailed off, staring into the conjured flames.

Yang shook her head, looking back. "Nah, Ren says they few times they chased her she never teleported. It's always mist, which has limited duration."

Weiss hummed, walking to meet her partner in a warm embrace. "I can't imagine Cinder just walking up to a boat we leave on the beach. It's too convenient." She murmured, laying her cheek against Yang's collar, allowing her eyes to flutter as she savored the temperature.

"Well, she's been hiding for over a week now." Yang noted. "She's gotta' be getting hungry." "True, unless she's been subsisting on animals...but animal blood is not desirable, nor is it as nutritious." Weiss agreed.

"So we use a human to bait her out." Yang suggested.

Weiss thought for a moment. "Agreed...Velvet would volunteer, but I don't want to place her in danger, and I know she's not a virgin...Pyrrha could work, but I've told Cinder too much. She's a Huntress, even if Cinder could defeat her, she wouldn't want to incite more panic. She's smarter than that...but..." Weiss suddenly became aware of a familiar floral scent upon the wind, and breathed in. "Ruby." She stated, opening her eyes and turning toward the source. Crimson essence flowed from the summon, gradually forming into the shape of a spear, which slowly solidified in her hands. Blake praised her, much to Ruby's joy, as she began twirling the newly formed weapon.

"Well, Ruby is a virgin...but I don't know if it counts." Yang mused.

"It does, she's smells beautiful Yang, and her blood...I think if Cinder caught her scent it would draw her like a fly." Weiss declared.

"If she catches her scent." Yang cautioned. "We still don't know where to look for Cinder. We can't
just send Ruby into the forest with a basket and hope she bumps into the big bad...bat?" Yang stumbled on the comparison.

Weiss chuckled. "I have an idea for that too...but first we need a team meeting."

"Ooh, making it official are we?" Yang asked.

"What better way to raise morale?" Weiss smirked. "Ruby can even be our mascot."

Ruby jumped at the plan. Weiss had expected as much, Ruby adored Weiss, and under any other circumstances she would feel guilty taking advantage of that, but Ruby was no shrinking violet. She had demonstrated her capability against Weiss twice. It was Pyrrha she worried for, Ruby was her summon after all, and asking to place Ruby in danger after being so adamant about her protection would seem hypocritical. Indeed, when Pyrrha did not respond at first, Weiss grew worried, but in the end, Pyrrha only had one condition - they had to involve Glynda, every step of the way.

"So your response when I fear for your safety is to place another in danger." Glynda groused as she entered the living room, Blake in tow.

"Ruby is more than capable of defending herself, and will have Blake's assistance." Weiss defended, seated in an armchair close to the fire, the visage of Yang's upper body lounging within.

"If you manage to locate Cinder, if you manage to curry favor with the spriggans." Glynda cautioned. "It is nearing winter, their influence is weakened. They will be more reclusive and temperamental, and the Templars are not helping."

"Ruby has an affinity with nature." Weiss noted. "Perhaps they will see her as a form of kin. Nora and Ren were raised by their kind. Between the three I'm sure we can garner some assistance."

Glynda sighed, rubbing the bridge of her nose. "Pyrrha, what is your view of the situation?" She reached out.

Pyrrha sat on the couch, Ruby cuddled into her side. She had a weary look of resignation on her face as she spoke. "I trust in Ruby's capabilities, I trust in Blake's protection, and I trust that Weiss' plan may work. Misgivings aside, the longer we allow Cinder to roam free, the greater chance of her escape. It is our duty to exhaust all possible strategies in order to prevent that, lest she kill again." Her expression seemed to grow more confident as she spoke. At least she seemed genuine.

"Very well." Glynda acknowledged, taking a deep breath. "Ruby, seeing as you will be the focus of this plan, you should be the one to ask Nora and Ren. In the meantime, Weiss, we need to fashion a nullification collar to contain Cinder's power, and Pyrrha, you must visit Port. He will have suitable restraints." She pointed a finger at Ruby. "Do not inform the Templars of this. Not James, not even Winter. We do not want them interfering. They will only mess it up."

"James?" Ruby asked.

"General Ironwood, Ruby." Weiss explained.

"Oh...you don't like him very much." Ruby observed.

"That's an understatement." Blake snorted.

"Quiet you." Glynda shot back. Blake rolled her eyes, shrinking into her cat form and padding over
to lay by Yang. "James has demonstrated on several occasions that his judgement is questionable, each time costing innocent beings their lives. His heavy handed, clumsy tactics are a danger to all of us, and his presence on this island violates its purpose."

Ruby quirked her head at that. "What purpose?"

"Safe haven from the world at large, protection from persecution, from the Templar Order." Glynda explained. "Patch was founded by Valean refugees after the Great War. Many veterans made their peace here, from all lands, and for centuries this island has provided that peace, repelling attempts to absorb it, rejecting organized authorities, and here we are with Templars, Templars, who propagate the greatest oligarchy in the history of Remnant, camping on our soil, it's tantamount to an invasion. Of all the bloody stupid decisions Winter could make-"

"Winter did what she thought was best Glynda!" Weiss defended. "Ironwood saved my life-"

"Because you were human, because you were an innocent, human girl, and even now his leniency stems from his knowing you as human." Glynda shot back. "He tolerates the supernatural world, views all who are not pure as lesser beings. He seems reasonable, until something stands in his way, and gods help you if his target is behind others of lesser nature." Her voice warbled, and she turned away, breathing heavily. The entire room stood in shocked silence. Blake flitted over to Glynda in a blink of shadow, her human form wrapping its arms around Glynda's arm. They exchanged a few whispers and Glynda shook her head. "No Templars. Go do your parts. Weiss...I will be with you in a moment." With that she left the room, leaving the others to stew in silence.

Ruby finally spoke up. "Mr. Ironwood doesn't seem to mind me…"

Pyrrha and Ruby set out not long after, Glynda's outburst fresh in their minds. It was rare for the Master Witch to show so much emotion for anything, let alone vitriol, but it seemed she had a delicate history with General Ironwood. Pyrrha explained that she had expressed distaste for Templars and their practices in the past, each time with the same bitterness, but never General Ironwood by name. She speculated that they had hurt Glynda, or someone she cared for, but had no desire to pry. Glynda's past was colorful, but vague, and there had to be a good reason for that.

Ruby parted ways with Pyrrha as they passed Port's forge, continuing onward to the Templar camp. The sky was at its brightest grey when she arrived, and Penny met her not long after.

"Hey Penny, how are you?" Ruby squeezed out. Penny dropped her with a giggle.

"I am splendid Ruby." Penny cheered. "More children approached me today. They were very kind, one of them gave me a muffin…" A twinge of a frown flickered across her face, before passing. "I gave it to Miss Schnee. She told me it was very nice."

"Muffins are nice...I'm sorry Penny, but I'm here for a reason today." Ruby refocused. "I need to talk to Nora and Ren."

"That is no problem." Penny declared. "The Huntsmen are bathing in a nearby lake. Would you like me to take you to them?"

"Penny...I need you to keep a secret…" Ruby lowered her voice. "We don't want the Templars to know."

Penny's brow furrowed. "Why not Ruby?" She whispered.
"We have a plan, but it needs to stay small, and the Templars will make a lot of noise, and we can't have that." Ruby explained. "It'll put me in danger, but I trust you Penny. You can keep me safe, please?"

Penny twitched. "You...you trust me?" She asked, her voice small.

Ruby smiled and nodded. "With my life."

That brought a smile to Penny's face. She rose to full height and snapped a salute. "You can count on me Ruby, I won't lead you astray!" She chirped confidently.

Ruby giggled. "I know I can, so let's go!"

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After a five minute hike into the forest, splashing and joyful exclamations became evident, and as they broke through the trees Ruby caught first sight of their destination and the individuals within. Ren and Nora were wrestling in the shallows of the water, Nora's giggling and squealing carrying through the clearing as she pinned Ren down, the quieter of the two chuckling to himself as he barely kept his head above the water. Nora stretched languidly, moaning with pleasure as she moved her hips. Then her gaze snapped towards the newcomers.

"Heya' guys!" Nora called, waving cheerfully. "Wanna' join us? The water's fine!" She laughed again, leaning down to kiss Ren, who indulged her for the time being.

"Isn't it too cold for you?" Ruby wondered. The cold did not bother her, but everyone else was already rugging up.

Nora broke the kiss to answer. "Nah, we wolves have a lot of body heat. It's actually nice and cool now. When it starts snowing it'll be a bit much though."

"Nora, we shouldn't do this with company." Ren advised.

"But Renny, Ruby doesn't mind, and Penny probably finds it interesting." Nora protested. "Don't you Penny?"

"Oh, I uh..." Penny stammered, looking away. "It is interesting, yes. You are far more...curved than I am."

"Aw, you're still cute though." Nora jumped up, baring a rather wild thatch of red hair down below as Ren grunted. "What do you look like under there anyway? Anatomically correct I hope?" Nora giggled.

Penny slumped. "No, no I'm afraid not. I am shapely, but non-functional...I am not affection ready." She sadly murmured. Ruby laid a hand on her shoulder in comfort, but with some splashing and thudding, Nora jogged up before them, wrapping Penny in a hug.

"Don't let that get you down, affection is more than just baby makin'." Nora declared. "Anyone can love, and you've got a very pretty face for kissing." She drew Penny into a kiss, shocking the automaton, who squeaked and jerked, but did not pull away, her enameled lips parting beneath Nora's gentle flesh, as they hyperactive werewolf treated her as intimately as she would Ren.

Ruby caught Ren's unsurprised, resigned expression as he lay still in the water, before he too pushed himself up, wading to the water's edge. She had never seen a naked male in person before. Were they normally that large? She wondered.
"There, see, how do ya' feel?" Nora asked softly as she pulled away.

Penny made a choked sound, made extra strange by the flanging of her voice, she shuddered. "I...I don't know...I...I need to...I need to sit down." She stammered, letting go of Ruby's hand and wandering off.

Ruby looked from her friend to Nora, who wore a sad smile. "Poor girl, she really needs affection...you should kiss her more Ruby." Nora suggested.

Ruby frowned. "I think you scared her Nora." She worried.

"Nah, she's just a little shocked and confused." Nora theorized. "I don't think it's ever occurred to her that love doesn't end with the body. You think Ren and I stop booping when we go wolf? We can level a forest if we wanna'." She chuckled, then sat down. "She needs hugs every day, and a smooch every now and then, until she learns to love herself again."

"I didn't know you knew her that well." Ruby wondered.

"She told me, yesterday, after she came back from spending time with you." Nora explained. "She asked if we could be friends. She really is beautiful, nuts and bolts and all, that poor, poor girl." Nora lamented. "But that'll take time. Maybe now she'll have some more questions. Speakin' of which, whatchya' up to?"

"We need your help with a plan." Ruby started. "The Templars are too loud, and you're having trouble tracking, so we're going to use me as bait to draw Cinder into a trap, but we need to know where to look for her, and we think the spriggans can help."

Nora slumped at that, arms wrapping around her legs. "We thought so too." She murmured. Ren approached, clad in a pair of pants. He held out a towel to Nora, who sighed, accepting it and drying herself. "Wherever we go, we ask the spriggans to help, but here...they didn't want to talk to me, they didn't answer my call...a-and that's their right. They aren't slaves to us, we trespass on their land, cut down their trees. Sometimes the spriggans of a territory just don't want anything to do with people...and Patch is so much smaller than most places, the proximity has probably made them very angry for a long time."

"But you didn't do anything wrong." Ruby countered. "Why wouldn't they talk to you?"

"I don't know Ruby...I don't know...but I don't want to make them upset." Nora frowned. "They deserve to live in peace, and it's nearing winter. They'll be tired and weakened. We shouldn't bother them." She bowed her head.

Ren sighed, sitting down and pulling her close. "What is the issue now?" He asked softly.

"Ruby wants to talk to the spriggans, to try and find Cinder, but I told her they wouldn't speak to me." Nora replied.

"But they should, shouldn't they?" Ruby pressed. "They protect the forest, and Cinder's hiding there, and the Templars are probably hurting it, shouldn't that bother them?"

"It should, but spriggans are stubborn." Ren responded. "They don't care for humans at all Ruby. We have a kinship with them, but not all choose to recognize it."

"Well...how can I find them?" Ruby asked. "I need to try. I can make a deal with them, do something in return for their help, even if they just tell me to go away I need to try!"
"It's not difficult, for us at least." Ren noted. "We know their tongue, we can call them again."

"They won't respond Ren." Nora whimpered. "They don't want me."

"Nora, they just don't know you." Ren encouraged. "They are not cruel. Perhaps they were just wary. We should try again."

"But what if they don't…" Nora barely whispered into his neck.

"They will." Ren insisted. "No one can resist your heart Nora." He soothed, cupping her head, guiding her gaze upward. "Let us try again. We cannot lose faith in our family." Nora sniffled, and nodded. Ren kissed at her tears, once on each cheek, before meeting her lips, slowly, lovingly, calming his saddened mate with affection.

Nora shuddered a breath. "Alright, okay, I'll try again."
Nora stood, the others following as she walked along the lake's edge. Sudden footsteps alerted Ruby to Penny's return. She looked to her friend, who twitched a smile, holding out her hand to take. Ruby did so, giving it a squeeze. Nora suddenly halted, staring at a particularly aged-looking tree. She approached, kneeling by its roots. Nora clenched a hand to her chest, breathing long and deep, before reaching out to grasp the mossy wood. "Mor, hjælp os. Jeg beder jer!" She pleaded in a strange tongue, gazing up into the leaves. Nothing happened. The air was still, no birds sang, no creatures scurried, and Nora slumped with a whimper.

The sudden crackling of bark rang through the clearing, and the very forest came alive with movement. The trees bent and warped, forming bodies of bark and leaf, female in form, yet so obviously different, with their vine-like hair, crowns and clawed feet resembling the very wood that birthed them. A dozen surrounded the group, with the greatest of their kind standing before Nora, taller, paler, mottled, glass-like armor adorning her forearms and feet, a cloak of leaves hanging from her shoulders, her brown eyes gleaming in the shade.

"Magnhild." The tall spriggan spoke.

Nora gasped, falling prostrate before her. Leveling a stare at the other three, the spriggan quirked her head at Ren, who bowed in respect, before it shifted its gaze, narrowing its eyes at Ruby and Penny, who gazed in wonder. Around her, the lesser spriggans observed curiously, whispering amongst themselves. Ruby found herself locked into the leader's gaze, brown boring into silver, like no one had before. Suddenly the spriggan knelt, reaching down to cup Nora's face, bringing it upward. They began conversing in the strange language, the spriggan's voice soft and motherly, Nora's unsteady and emotional. Nora crept forward on her knees, clasping her hands as she spoke frantically.

"Ruby." Nora suddenly spoke clearly, both her and the matron looking back at the summon. Ruby waved. "And Penny, they are good people."

The spriggan hummed, murmuring an affectionate phrase, standing, running her nails through Nora's hair as she moved to approach. "My name is Amber, Matron of this isle." She introduced herself, now towering over the automaton and summon. "It is rare I encounter mysteries in this world, yet two stand before me, beings of blood and steel...so familiar, yet so alien. Aberrations of nature...blameless be your existence, yet more violations of the humans." Penny flinched as Amber suddenly reached out, staring wide eyed as the Matron traced the plates composing her facial features. "And you would defend them...for all the pain they cause you, the fate to which they cursed you."

"My fate...my fate is my own, Matron Amber." Penny's voice warbled. "I fight to protect all innocents, however removed I may be from them. I fight to prevent more fates such as mine." She made her last statement with more confidence.
The Matron smiled sadly at that. "Were it so easy." She looked to Ruby, who once more found herself drawn into gentle brown eyes. "You wish to avenge your friend."

"I want to help protect the people I care for." Ruby declared.

"And you expect us to assist you?" Amber pressed.

"I wanted to ask for your help defending our home." Ruby answered.

"This was our home before any humans settled the island." Amber growled. "Destroying our forest, spoiling the beauty of this place." She strode past the two, gesturing to the clearing before them. "How much longer until this too is gone, until one human steps foot in this glade and decides to take it for their selfish desires, and these metal men who cut down our trees without a flicker of forethought, killing our sleeping sisters, how many more must we lose before they understand we are here, and our patience is wearing thin."

"They don't know better, but we can teach them." Ruby defended. "And the Templars will only be here until Cinder is caught. Then they'll leave, but the longer we wait, the longer they'll be here. This is the only way. Please Amber, we need your help. We'll do anything in return, I'll do anything in return, even if I have to stop every human from harming your trees myself!"

"You promise an impossibility." Amber scoffed. "Humanity has shown time and time again we cannot live in harmony."

"The humans on this island wish only a peaceful existence." Ren noted. "How long have they lived on these shores and scarcely expanded?"

"And you would have us reward them for it?" Amber pressed. "Encourage them to take advantage of our home?"

"No, but this is their home too." Ren replied. "You can either make peace with them and find a way to coexist, or they can remain ignorant until you decide enough is enough and start fighting back. And what happens then? With Nature itself rising against them, they would hold nothing back, and fire would consume all. There is no sense in conflict Matron, the only choice is peace."

"Do not presume to know my choices Lie Ren." Amber shot back. "I know full well the hope of peace, just as our Atlesian sisters once did, and the humans burned them for it. These same metal men that roam our island, these Templars, razed their home, and yet you accompany them through ours, leading them deeper and deeper. And you call yourselves our kin."

"Matron please." Nora plead. "These are good humans. They seek no harm. We only walk alongside Templars so they do not wander astray, to focus their hunt, but the longer we hunt, the harder it is to focus them, the more they want to spread, and the closer they come to conflict with you. Please do not let that happen." Tears ran down her cheeks. "I hate killing humans, it pains my soul, but if I have to I swear it. I will fight and die alongside you, should it come to that, but please, let us try to avoid that. We only ask one favor, and when the Templars leave, we will honor you, and ensure the people do so too, whatever it takes."

Amber glared at the quivering werewolf, who struggled to maintain her composure beneath such harsh appraisal. Eventually she relented, turning to Penny this time. "You came here with them, you consider them your brothers. What say you? Will they leave, satisfied, should this vampire be captured?"

"I assume so Matron Amber." Penny answered. "The General only came out of care for former
Specialist Schnee... he may wish to maintain a presence of sorts on this island but... I may be able to help avoid that, I hope."

The Matron sighed, closing her eyes. Around them the other spriggans did the same, whispering ceasing for a time. Nora shrank in on herself, whispering in the strange language. Ren knelt to pull her into his arms, stroking her hair and whispering back. "Your prey hunts nightly, just northwest of the main road, between the villages." Amber finally informed, pointing for emphasis. The spriggans resumed their activity, some leaving, sinking into the trees from whence they came. Nora looked to the Matron with renewed reverence. "This is the assistance we grant. Do with it what you will. We will be watching."

Amber knelt before Nora and Ren, once more cupping the girl's cheek, exchanging more foreign words. Nora nodded, grinning, bowing her head, only for the Matron to plant a gentle kiss upon her forehead. Nora gasped as the Matron stood, blinking blearily up at her as she turned her gaze upon Ruby and Penny one more time, meeting their eyes in turn.

"Thank you." Ruby smiled.

"Thank you Matron Amber." Penny bowed her head. Amber quirked her own. She seemed about to say something, before deciding against it, turning away to sink into the large tree, the few remaining spriggans following suit.

"She accepts me Ren." Nora croaked, teary eyes bright once more. "We can stay, we have their blessing!" She jumped to her feet, pulling her mate along with her.

"Yes Nora, I was listening, I saw." Ren grunted as Nora lifted him into a hug. "But first, we need to talk about this plan."

"Oh, right." Nora released her mate, giggling. "Cinder first, family later! Hey Penny, how ya' feelin'?"

"Uh...I'm oka-" Penny hiccuped. "Excuse me. What happens now Ruby?"

"Now...now we don't tell the Templars anything." Ruby replied. "But you know. You can be ready. If we capture her, then we'll come get the Templars, and they can all go."

"You should just kill her." Nora spat. "That monster deserves it."

"Capture is preferable." Ren disagreed. "So she can answer for her crimes, and be made an example of."

"Though should she attempt to escape from Templar custody, the sentence is immediate execution, as per Templar custom." Penny noted.

"Ooh, there's that!" Nora cheered.

"I hope it doesn't come to that." Ruby murmured. "I hope this all just goes right, so no one else gets hurt. I just want this all to be over."

Night was falling. After a day of rehearsal and preparation, all was in place, but not all were ready as they gathered in Glynda's living room, the time of the hunt encroaching. Glynda and Blake exchanged final, hushed words, Ren kept an excited Nora placated by the fire, and Weiss bundled Ruby into her arms.
"Thank you Ruby, whether this works or not, thank you for doing this for me." Weiss expressed, hugging Ruby close.

"Anything for my friend." Ruby responded, giving Weiss a firmer squeeze before allowing her to pull back.

Yang knelt down, clasping Ruby's hands in her own. "You'll be fine. Just focus on your anger and it'll make it your strength, and don't be afraid to be rough. Vampires are really tough, trust me, I know." She winked, just as Weiss swatted her over the head.

"Ruby." Pyrrha called, standing patiently to the side. Yang gave Ruby another wink, before joining Blake and Glynda with Weiss. Pyrrha knelt as Ruby approached, reaching out to pull her into her arms. Ruby could feel Pyrrha's heart racing. "Come back to me." Pyrrha whispered into her shoulder.

"I promise." Ruby murmured, planting a soft kiss on Pyrrha's cheek. "I'll always come back to you." They remained as such, enjoying the warmth of each other's affection, until a soft voice called.

"Ruby." Blake said. Ruby and Pyrrha pulled apart to find the shadow aspect in wait.

Pyrrha stood, leaving a hand on Ruby's shoulder as she lay another on Blake's arm. "Please be careful."

"I will protect her with my life Pyrrha." Blake promised. "Are you ready Ruby?"

"Ready and willing." Ruby chirped, pulling out her knife. "Should I do it here or later?"

"Later Ruby." Blake chuckled. "Come on, we have a long night ahead of us."

"Alright." Ruby sheathed the dagger and hugged Pyrrha once more.

"Ruby, if you feel something has gone wrong, please do not linger." Pyrrha beseeched.

"If something goes wrong, I will personally intervene." Glynda interrupted. "But there will be no mistakes tonight. She grasped Blake's arm to pull her into a heated kiss. Nora whistled before Ren could silence her, and even Weiss blinked in surprise as pink tinted Pyrrha's features. "Will there?" Glynda murmured, bumping their foreheads together.

Blake smiled back. "Never."

First came the sound - footfalls, fast and irregular. As Cinder got closer she could hear more - heavy breathing, little whimpers. Then there was the smell - like manna from heaven - blood, fresh blood, virgin blood, a scent brand new and yet familiar. It took her back to a time long past, when she had found Emerald tending the gardens, a cut on her finger, the scent of her still virgin blood mixing with the flowers.

Cinder was cautious. She could not afford to squander this opportunity, not now, not when the situation was so desperate. She was already hunting closer to civilization than she would have liked, what with the Templars now searching her previous hunting grounds. The forests seemed barren, and Emerald could only eat so many of those horrid rations before they made her ill, and Cinder could not have that.

If the vampire could subsist from another source for a time, it would take the pressure off Emerald,
allow her to regain her strength. And what a source. Cinder's prey came into view through the
darkness - a girl, a teenager perhaps, knees and arms bloodied, terror etched on her face as she
raced along an overgrown path, a damaged basket in hand and a tattered cloak flowing behind her.
Cinder usually enjoyed the hunt, luring, seducing her prey, but there was no time for that. She was
far too thirsty to wait, and that scent...could this finally be the one that would slake her thirst?

The girl was sprinting, powered by the surge of adrenaline that could only be inspired by sheer
panic. Still, Cinder had no trouble outrunning her. She found a spot on the path ahead, around a
blind turn, obscured by brush and darkness, and there she waited. It did not take long. The girl
came charging down the path and barely had a chance to gasp and stumble before running into
Cinder's waiting arms. Cinder caught the girl, who looked up at her with tears in her eyes, the
terror on her face melting away. The vampire offered a kind smile. The least she could do was
comfort the girl before drinking her dry.

After taking a few heavy, ragged breaths, the girl returned Cinder's reassuring embrace. "Thank the
gods!" The girl cried. "I thought I was a goner! I was going to visit my grandma's house in the
mountains...and I took a shortcut...but it was the wrong one and I got lost...and it started getting
dark and it's dangerous at night and I didn't want to stop running...and I fell down a few times
but...but now I found someone! I was so scared!"

"Shh, it's okay." Cinder soothed, rubbing the girl's back. "I've got you now, you're safe. I'll protect
you." The girl's breathing calmed as she smiled at Cinder. Her silver eyes were...mesmerizing.
Cinder would have loved nothing more than to spend some time admiring the girl, so beautiful, so
innocent, her skin so fair. But her scent...it filled Cinder with a hunger the likes of which she had
never experienced. She had to have a taste. "Just...relax." The girl nodded against Cinder's
shoulder, and the vampire saw her opening. She bared her fangs and bent down to bite.

Cinder felt a sudden pressure around her neck and jolted upright. It mostly subsided, but something
remained. She reached up to feel a leather collar around her neck. "What is this?!" The vampire
demanded. The girl smirked at her, and suddenly her cloak dissolved into strands of red. The girl
pushed her away with inhuman strength, just as the strands wrapped around Cinder's body. "What
are you?!" Cinder struggled against the binds, but soon more ensnared her, these black, impossibly
dark, like the void itself. She snarled and attempted to transform to mist...and nothing happened.

Before Cinder could process what was going on, there was a flash of light and an older blonde
woman appeared before her. "Cinder Fall..." The woman smirked. A dark form floated beside her,
resolving into a beautiful woman with amber eyes.

"Wha-who the hell are you people?!!" Cinder shouted.

"Who they are is immaterial." The blonde waved off the question. "I am Glynda, Master Witch of
Patch, and you're under arrest." She reached out toward Cinder, and lightning flew from her
fingertips.

Emerald stood at the cave's mouth, waiting. Cinder never made her wait if she could help it. She
knew it made Emerald's insecurities arise, her paranoia, her fear of abandonment. There were many
humans who desired Cinder's love, many who threw themselves at her feet at the slightest
provocation, virgin women, offered by their families like cheap whores, property to be traded for
simple favor, but she would have none. Emerald was all she desired, her loyal servant, her faithful
concubine, her love, and Emerald had nothing but adoration for her, even as she developed a taste
for virgin blood.

She was there when it happened. Much to Emerald's shame, it was her own eyes that had
wandered, for the first time in her life another caught her gaze, and along with it, Cinder's
amusement. A lovely dancer in Mistral, young, innocent, beautiful, eyes like diamonds, hair like
fine silk, she came undone between them, a dozen times over. And Cinder fed. And fed, and fed
until the light dulled from her eyes and her skin paled sickly. And Cinder laughed, a laugh Emerald
had not heard since they were but children. And they made love so passionately that Emerald could
barely awake the next day.

And so their journey took a turn, from a simple desire to explore the world, to experiencing the
rush of first love, over and over again, that single ecstacy Emerald could never hope to provide.
She never once denied Cinder, never once doubted her, never once scorned her desire. Cinder was
her love, one and true, and no matter what pretty body lie drained of life's blood before her,
Emerald knew Cinder would always return to her.

So she waited. And waited. And panicked.

"Mercury!" Emerald called, padding back into the cave. "Mercury!"

"I'm in the middle of something." Mercury jabbed. Emerald huffed, tearing aside one of the privacy
curtains to scowl at the sight before her, Dew riding Mercury like a whore in heat, whimpering into
his neck as she bounced in place. "What? Ready to join in?" He sneered.

Emerald glared, picking up Mercury's discarded pants and throwing them at his smug face.
"Cinder hasn't come back!"

"Really?" Mercury rolled his eyes. "I hadn't noticed."

"She was supposed to be back by midnight!" Emerald exclaimed. "It's nearly dawn!"

"So she's probably found another toy somewhere." Mercury scoffed. "Take your envy elsewhere-
"

"Mercury please!" Emerald choked, shaking. "Please go and search for her. Make sure she's
safe, please. I'll do anything!"

That got Mercury's attention. He quirked his brow, then slapped Dew's rear. "Off." He ordered.
Dew whined, but hurried off, lest she incur harsher pain. Her master stood, pulling on his pants.
"Anything huh? That's a big promise." He smirked.

Emerald had to suppress a shudder. "I don't care, just find her, make sure she's safe, and I'll deal
with your anything next time she leaves."

Mercury shrugged, pulling on his boots, shirt and jacket. "Fine then. Play nice with the pet while
I'm gone. She's all worked up because of you after all." He chuckled, brushing past.

Dew whimpered, obediently waiting on her knees, quivering with unchecked lust, staring up in
hope with her big violet eyes. As Mercury stomped out she sighed, trying to still her beating heart.
"M-Mistress?" She murmured.

Emerald felt her heart ache with pity. She knew the thrall's mind was fighting back against
Mercury's control, she had been from the start, but it was a losing battle against such a powerful
grasp. "It's okay, you don't have to touch me."

"But Master sai-" Dew started.

"Master isn't here Dew." Emerald cut her off. "You don't have to do what he says."
"But Master said you would play with m-me." Dew protested. "He said you had to! If you don't he'll be mad at me. Please don't make him mad. I just want to be good!" She begged, pleading with her hands clasped.

Emerald sighed, kneeling to take the scared woman's hands in her own. "I will, I will, calm yourself." She soothed, reaching up to cup Dew's tear-streaked cheek. The thrall nuzzled into her hand. "Just...don't call me mistress. My name is Emerald, your name is Dew, we are humans, not playthings, to be cared for, not abused." Emerald was not sure if her words could get through, or if they would do any good. She hoped the girl inside, the one locked away by enthrallment, had no awareness at all, that she did not know what was happening to her.

"N-not abused...will you care for me M-M...Emerald?" Dew whispered, still shaking, both in fear and arousal.

Emerald closed in, her lips hovering close. "I promise."
Containment

Chapter by RealTerminal

Chapter Summary

"You're gonna' be the death of us."

Cinder slept more than most of her kind. Of all vampires, she knew well the benefits of conservation, the selfishness of waste. A well nourished human contained an average of ten pints of blood. Losing a fifth of said volume would cause one to go into shock, from which the human could easily die. Humans were not a bountiful fountain of blood, they were a gift, to be nurtured and cultivated. One feeding a week at most, and even so, keeping careful consideration of their physical health was critical.

And so Cinder chose to sleep, to conserve her blood. Emerald was a loyal servant, her dearest friend, her chosen. Without hesitation she offered her life's blood, from childhood, when Emerald had been brought to her room for her first human feeding, through her teenage years, tending their gardens, until Cinder reached adulthood, claiming Emerald officially and publicly as her servant. There had been close calls, Cinder hungered and Emerald never once doubted her restraint. Foolishly so, for Cinder was a vampire, Emerald was a human, her life's end Cinder's very whim, and yet Emerald never once gazed upon her with anything less than sheer adoration.

And so she slept, taking from Emerald only when needed to sustain her, savoring and rewarding every drop of vital essence. It was not until Lisa that Cinder became aware of the thirst lurking below, the true depths of her infernal weakness, whispering at the edge of her thoughts, clinging to her body like a disease, the only cure indulgence...and so she slept...but this was no sleep. Waking was a slow process, tingles wracked her form, which struggled to respond, lifting her slumped body with a dull moan.

Opening her eyes, Cinder blinked in the darkness, taking in what little details were not obscured, golden pinpricks in the corner, an armored huntress in the doorway, firelight gleaming in polished bronze, and before her, the captor, standing in wait, emerald eyes coldly staring down at Cinder as she straightened her form. Jingling alerted her to the shackles binding her limbs, rough chains of mottled metal. She gave an experimental tug, but they held fast.

"Meteorite, Miss Fall." Her captor spoke. "You will not be leaving this room without my approval."

"Hmm." Cinder acknowledged, abandoning the probing to meet the witch's gaze. It was rare a human looked her in the eye that she did not intend to seduce, but this one was different. There was a darkness behind her, familiar, powerful, and in a way Cinder would never openly admit, intimidating.

"Why kill all those girls?" Glynda finally asked.

Cinder wanted to roll her eyes, such a simple question, with so many possible answers. "Pleasure." She chose, resisting a smirk.

"Why come to Patch?" Glynda continued. Cinder merely shrugged. Patch was just another
destination, a place she had heard about, but never heard much of. "Who are you working with?"

That almost broke Cinder's facade, as a pang of worry shot through her heart, the thought of Emerald worrying over her absence plaguing her mind. "No one." She stated, doing her utmost to keep a blank expression.

Glynda showed neither relief nor annoyance, boring into her with the same dull glare. "What were you planning to do next?"

Cinder felt an itch of annoyance. These questions were meaningless. They gave her nothing. "Hunt." She answered, as was her intention.

Glynda blew air from her nose, closing her eyes. She stayed like that for a time. Cinder's eyes wandered over to the huntress, Pyrrha, Weiss had called her, young, virginal, beautiful, and angry. She met Cinder's gaze fearlessly, spear clenched in hand, shield slung across her back. "Why Weiss?" The witch suddenly asked.

Cinder snapped back to a softer look. She felt a warm fondness fill her heart, and she allowed herself a smile. "She was pure." She answered, honestly.

Glynda quirked her head. "Pure?"

Cinder felt her smile grow. Closing her eyes, she allowed herself to reminisce. Their meeting had been pure luck. Far from a social flower, she had happened upon Weiss killing a stray Beowolf, such a beautiful sight, dancing away from its claws, whittling away at its resistance with cold precision, until it finally fell, a perfect spear of ice impaling its skull. It was beautiful. "Weiss was...strong, driven, dedicated to her craft, moving effortlessly with grace so many humans pray for, and yet when engaged on a personal level, she was humble, shyly smiling at every little compliment paid, flushing so easily, as if ashamed of praise, no matter how well earned...she was beautiful, but she was lonely, unappreciated, yearning for love, love no other had sought to give her...and it broke my heart to see such a gift to humanity wasted."

"And so you killed her." Glynda growled.

"I gave her my all, like no one else would, like no one else ever could." Cinder insisted. "She would have lived out her days taken for granted, coveted by men, envied by women, miserable and alone, if not abused by the tender nature of her heart. This world is cruel to souls such as her own, and so I granted her mercy."

"Mercy...you bled her dry, and abandoned her." Glynda hissed, eyes narrowing.

Cinder's smile twitched downward. "And I will forever honor her memory. The blood that runs in my veins, her name, her love, will never leave my thoughts." Glynda's lip curled in disgust, her body tense with anger. Cinder could sense her heart beating furiously, the darkness of the room growing, swallowing yet more light in the process, until the witch sighed, turning to leave the room, the huntress stepping aside to let her pass.

The darkness receded. Cinder felt the urge to take a breath, as if the witch's presence had been strangling. The pinpricks in the corner returned, brighter than before, larger. Eyes, notable eyes, glaring down at her. She felt a flicker by her ankle, familiar, this was the shadow that had bound and strangled her before. There would indeed be no escape from this, even unchained. Also familiar was the scent that permeated the air now, floral, alluring, if weaker. She drank it in, relishing in the comfort, tracking it's source...the huntress.
"What?" Pyrrha growled, narrowing her gaze.

Cinder must have been staring. She grinned. "You smell like your sister...like...the botanical gardens..." Cinder's smile grew fond. Emerald tended those gardens dutifully, the scent of a thousand flowers clinging to her like perfume for hours afterward. "It's beautiful...you're beautiful." She admired.

This earned a reaction, the huntress visibly paling, disgusted, eyes clouding with anger. She approached Cinder, pausing only to shake a tendril of shadow from her ankle, as she leveled the silver tip of her spear with the vampire's throat. Cinder leaned back to avoid its contact, smirking at the unfettered fury in the huntress' expression. "The only reason you are not dead and ashes right now, is because you are to be held accountable for all your victims. You are a monster, a blight upon your kind, and I would relish seeing you burn."

"Pyrrha." A voice suddenly spoke. Cinder felt cold explode in her heart as she turned to the doorway to behold the still living form of Weiss Schnee, glaring coldly with those gorgeous blue eyes. "Ruby needs you."

Cinder gaped. "Weiss?"

Mercury sprinted into the cave, a bag slung over his shoulder. "Dew, Emerald, pack up!" He yelled, laying the bag on the ground to rifle through it.

"What, what happened?" Emerald responded, tearing through the privacy curtain bereft of clothing. "Where is Cinder?!"

"The witch got her." Mercury replied. "The Templars are gonna' move her around midday. Get dressed, or don't, get our stuff together. I've got a plan, but it's risky, so I need you to shut up and listen, okay? Just imagine Cinder's giving the orders."

"The witch?" Emerald's hands clutched at her own hair as she began to hyperventilate. "How?" She flinched as an arm wrapped around her midsection, as Dew latched onto her once more in an attempt to soothe her. "Dew not now...i-is she okay? What are you going to do? What am I doing?"

"You're packing, and moving to the spot where we're going to meet up once Cinder's free." Mercury answered. "When I spring Cinder they'll be disoriented. We'll regroup, rush the docks, take some hostages, and take a ship to the mainland."

Emerald took several deep breaths, willing her heart to calm, patting Dew's arms to let go. She turned, cupping the girl's cheeks. "Get dressed. Please bring me my clothes."

"I-I don't have any." Dew stammered, a flash of fear in her eyes.

"Take some of mine, it's okay." Emerald soothed, pecking her on the forehead before letting go. She hurried to obey, and Emerald began hastily packing the cooking area supplies. "What about Dew?"

Mercury grunted. "We're not taking her with us."

"We can't just leave her here." Emerald hissed, but stopped as the girl padded over, wearing one of Emerald's sleepshirts, another set of clothes folded neatly in hand.

"Here you go mis...Emerald." Dew greeted, handing them over.
"Thank you Dew." Emerald plastered on a smile. "Please pack up the beds and clothes."

"Yes ma'am." Dew responded. The thrall returned to her work.

Mercury scoffed. "Leave you alone for a few hours and she falls in love with you instead."

"Maybe if you showed her a few ounces of respect she'd be more willing." Emerald shot back.

"Whatever, say your last before we go." Mercury huffed.

Emerald froze, a chill running down her spine. "Mercury no, please don't."

"We're not taking her with us, and she knows too much." Mercury insisted.

"She's an innocent." Emerald pleaded. "You've taken so much from her already. Please don't kill her."

"Em-" Mercury started.

"I'll do anything." Emerald begged.

"You've already played that card." Mercury smirked.

"So double it, I don't care what I have to do." Emerald persisted, tears welling in her eyes. "Just please Mercury, for once in your life take mercy on my kind. She's given enough, please."

Mercury sighed, shaking his head. "You're gonna' be the death of us."

As the huntress left, Weiss stepped forward, standing before Cinder as strong as the day they had met, but with a brighter shadow, the blonde pyro, slowly pacing behind her like an incensed bull, red eyes glaring at Cinder, in stark contrast to Weiss' chilled gaze. She looked flawless, paler than before, but her head was still held high, platinum hair in its usual side tail, sturdy hunting attire covered by a fur trimmed ivory cloak. She was almost regal.

"You're alive." Cinder whispered in awe.

Weiss frowned. "Of course I am." She said, as if it were a simple matter of fact.

Cinder chuckled, shaking her head. "I never thought I'd see you again."

"Of course you didn't." Weiss growled.

"You're so beautiful." Cinder admired. The aspect flinched, fists clenching.

Weiss scowled. "You turned me into a monster." She hissed.

"Monsters can be beautiful." Cinder smiled.

"Yes." Weiss glared. "They can."

"I'm sorry Weiss." Cinder apologized.

"Really?" Weiss snarled.

"I never meant for you to die...but...you should understand, you're here, you must have fed, it felt amazing, did it not?" Cinder pressed. "Life itself rushing through your body?"
"Yes." Weiss bit. "It did."

"Then you should also know that no other feeding will compare." Cinder continued. "No matter how starved you may be, how close to death you are, you will never experience that feeling again...or so I thought."

"And you thought what, I was that amazing?" Weiss scoffed.

"You were beyond description!" Cinder shuddered at the thought. "The moment your blood entered my body I was in heaven..."

"And you would say the same to your other victims." Weiss accused. "Did you tell them you loved their taste too?"

"Because it's true!" Cinder yelled. "Every one of you! Lisa, Ashley, Seras, Linda, Maria, Cho, Kara, every one of my victims were the most beautiful souls I've ever met. I never lied to them and I never lied to you Weiss. I love you." With a flash, the pacing aspect's hair burst into flames, glowing red eyes glaring so brightly Cinder would have feared for her safety, had she eyes for anyone but Weiss, who reached back to grasp her companion's hand.

"And yet...you killed me." Weiss said coldly.

Cinder felt her eyes sting. "I didn't mean to."

"How am I supposed to believe that, when you have left a trail of broken, dead hearts in your wake?" Weiss snapped. "At what point were you going to stop? Why should anyone believe your remorse when you continued to seduce and murder my...their kind? How can that cruelty ever be forgiven?!"

Cinder took a shaky breath, closing her eyes and trying to ground herself. She thought of Emerald, crimson eyes holding no fire, no hatred burning within, only love, adoration, utter devotion, despite how far she had gone, how much she had changed. "I don't expect you to understand...and I hope you never truly can, for it means you are so far gone as I." She finally murmured, breathing deep and calm, meeting Weiss' gaze, now clouding with tears of her own. "You should come with me Weiss. Salem would value an individual so talented as yourself. You could be so powerful. You have so much potential. We need not be enemies." She beseeched.

Weiss' jaw clenched, the hand gripping her companion's shaking with pressure. "I would rather die." She spat. And with that she turned on her heel and left the room, dragging the fiery aspect behind her.

Cinder was left to her thoughts, and the steady rhythm of her own incensed heart. "That's unfortunate." She murmured to herself.

"Did you truly expect any different?" A voice called from the room itself, the shadow then.

Cinder did not have a response for that.

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It was midday, the autumn sun shining through unseasonably clear skies. Glynda - in her full witch's robes - and Pyrrha - still in her Huntress armor - stood on either side of Cinder, the trio arrayed in front of Glynda's house. The vampire still had the magic suppressing collar around her neck, with a gag, meteorite handcuffs, chains and fetters to add to her neutralization. Ironwood walked up the hill toward them, Penny, five normal automatons, Ren and Nora, and a dozen Templars accompanying him. He stopped a few meters away, and an uneasy silence descended.
Grabbing Cinder by the arm, Pyrrha gently pushed her forward, crossing the distance to Ironwood and his soldiers.

Glynda remained where she was. "I transfer the fugitive to your custody." Ironwood was about to speak, but Glynda was not finished. "Now you and your soldiers are to leave my island."

Ironwood sighed. He considered protesting, but decided against it. All things considered, it was about as civil an exchange has he could reasonably expect. "You're not joining the escort?"

"Pyrrha will act in my stead." Glynda answered.

"Very well." Ironwood agreed.

Glynda retreated into her house, leaving the others outside. "General, what route do you intend to take?" Pyrrha asked, keeping a close eye on Cinder as the Templars formed up around her.

"The same we took on our way here." Ironwood replied. "We'll skirt around the village, then follow the most direct route."

"Very good." Pyrrha nodded. "Marching order?"

"Penny and I will lead the column, followed by the automatons." Ironwood answered. "Then the foot soldiers and the prisoner, with the werewolves at the rear."

"I'd like to remain near the prisoner, if you don't mind." Pyrrha requested.

"I don't." Ironwood allowed.

Pyrrha surveyed the troops with Ironwood. Some looked excited, a few jumpy. One individual was notable in her absence. "You didn't bring Winter?"

"She's preparing the prisoner's...containment." Ironwood explained. "And though I would trust her with my life, I would not trust her to refrain from killing the prisoner on sight."

"Understood." Pyrrha said.

"We are ready to move sir!" Penny announced.

"Anything else Huntress Nikos?" Ironwood asked.

"No sir." Pyrrha replied. "Lead on."

Ironwood gestured for his soldiers to follow, and they did so, heading back down the hill toward the village. Pyrrha remained with Cinder, but the vampire did not make any attempts at resistance, simply marching along at the column's pace, without any prompting. Given her earlier defiance, Cinder's sudden acquiescence was somewhat surprising, but that could easily be explained by the hopelessness of her situation. She was surrounded by soldiers and robots armed with silver weapons, and two werewolves to boot. Without her magic powers, any attempted escape would be short and fatal. Even with them there was little chance of making much progress.

The column marched through the fields that surrounded the village until upon reaching the other side, they joined the main road. If any townspeople took notice of the group, they kept their distance. The road was paved with stones, following the contours of the landscape from the main village to its port a few miles away. About halfway along its length, a path would split off, heading deeper into the island's interior, and to the Templar camp.
A short distance from the village, the road stretched along the edge of a ridge. The side of the road facing the ridge was lined with a low stone wall, constructed from the rocks local farmers had pulled from the ground centuries ago, when the island had first been settled. The occasional cluster of trees provided some shade on what was a rather warm day. The other side was flanked by an overgrown hedge that had probably started life as a boundary marker for a farmer's field. The rural scene was picturesque, beautiful even to Pyrrha, who had seen it dozens of times in her years living on the island. It was the very picture of peace and safety.

Until it was not.

A sharp crack echoed through the valley. The magic suppressing collar fell from Cinder's neck as a bullet sheared off its latch. Before anyone could react, Cinder turned to mist, the chains restraining her clattering to the stones where she had been standing.

"Ambush!" One of the Templars shouted.

"Don't let her get away!" Nora growled.

The air was suddenly filled by a cacophony of bangs, cracks and hisses, along with blinding light as clusters of grenades, thrown by an unseen attacker, detonated all around. Pyrrha looked around, her ears ringing, eyes still adjusting after the blinding flash. She drew her weapons, readying for a fight. Pyrrha scanned the hillside, searching for the fleeing Cinder or the assailant who had waylaid the column. With a sudden impact, there was nothing but pain.
Chapter Summary

"You...you monster, you demon this is sadistic!"

Weiss had not been expecting trouble. Still, she had felt compelled to follow the column transporting Cinder to Ironwood's ship. Along with Yang, she kept at a discreet distance, not sure what she was really doing. Weiss wore a hood to protect herself from the sun, and carried Myrtenaster on her belt. Attempting to escape would be folly, and Cinder knew it. Even if she slipped her chains, even if she got out of the magic suppressing collar, she was still a vampire in the sun, surrounded by trained soldiers wielding silver weapons. And Templar law demanded that any attempting to escape their custody be summarily executed. For Cinder to try to flee was suicide.

Weiss was shocked by what she saw. Cinder's collar was shot off and she turned to mist. A cloaked, masked figure tossed bundles of grenades at the soldiers from behind the roadside hedges. In the chaos Cinder floated away, heading for the forest. None of the soldiers were in any condition to follow Cinder, so Weiss pursued her. She could not go far in her mist form, and when she transformed back, Weiss would be ready to carry out the Templars' sentence for them.

Weiss and Yang waited at the treeline as Cinder floated into a clearing. The mist coalesced, solidifying. There she was, finally vulnerable. "Stay out of this." Weiss commanded.

"Are you sure?" Yang pressed.

"She's mine." Weiss growled. "I can take her."

"Okay…" Yang reluctantly agreed.

Weiss walked into the clearing. Cinder spotted her. "Wonderful." Cinder grumbled under her breath.

"Surrender now and maybe the Templars won't kill you." Weiss demanded. "Maybe I won't either."

"Oh Weiss...sweet Weiss...beautiful Weiss…" Cinder chanted. She reached down toward the ground. Dirt and sand rose up, and with a burst of flame, solidified into a rough glass sword. "We don't have to fight."

"I beg to differ." Weiss drew her blade, taking a fighting stance.

"We don't have to be enemies." Cinder continued. "Join me. The Coven can use a warrior of your skill and determination."

"Never." Weiss snapped. She lunged forward, stabbing for Cinder's heart. Cinder deflected the attack, and its follow up, but made no counterattack. Weiss slashed low, stabbed high, finishing her flurry with a leaping attack. Cinder deflected or dodged them all.
"I offer you one last chance Weiss." Cinder warned. "Come with me, learn under me, together we can achieve greatness."

"You prey on the innocent." Weiss hissed. "It is my duty to protect them from monsters like you!"

"A pity." Cinder frowned. She dropped her sword, and on contact with the ground it burst, returning to the dirt and sand from whence it came.

Rushing forward, Weiss once more stabbed for Cinder's heart, only for her to step aside. In an instant she grabbed her arm, twisting until Weiss screamed, Myrtenaster falling to the ground. She had miscalculated, thinking herself powerful, well fed, hidden from the sun. Cinder was supposed to be hungry and weak, the sun's draining rays sapping her strength, it should have been no contest. But Cinder was a blooded vampire. Glynda had been right.

Cinder elbowed Weiss in the chin, shoving her back. Weiss reeled, clutching her injured wrist, glancing up just in time to dodge a lunge from her own sword. Weiss bent over backwards to dodge, almost too late. She yelled as the blade grazed her cheek to brow, narrowly missing her eye. Losing her balance, Weiss fell flat on her back. Blinded by pain and blood, she scrambled back, only for a red hot pain to pin her in place. She writhed in pain as it burned, eyes opening to find her own beloved Myrtenaster embedded in her gut, the blessed silver searing her flesh.

"I am sorry Weiss." Cinder sighed.

"Get away from her!" Yang's voice screamed from the edge of the clearing. There came a whoosh and a blast of flame, then a blinding flash.

Pyrrha found herself flat on her back. It felt as though a hot iron had been slammed into the right side of her head. She looked left. Ren and Nora were engulfed in clouds of smoke. Nora writhed on the ground clawing at her eyes, crying out in agony. Struggling, Ren attempted to drag her out of the smoke, eyes squeezed shut, until he too succumbed and collapsed beside his mate. To her right, at the front, Ironwood and Penny lie on the ground, seemingly immobile, surrounded by the collapsed heaps of the automatons. Ironwood shouted muffled orders as Penny's voice crackled in response. The Templar foot soldiers stumbled around, dazed, some clutching at their heads, others struggling for balance.

Pyrrha rolled over, grabbing her dropped weapons. She noted the blood on the road where she had fallen, but there was no time to dwell on it. She looked at a nearby Templar just in time to see blood explode from his shoulder as a bullet tore through. He collapsed, his gleaming white armor stained red. "Sniper!" Another soldier screamed. Those that could dove for the cover of the stone wall, one dragging the wounded soldier with her.

With his one functioning arm, Ironwood dragged himself out of the open. "Nikos, get to cover!" He shouted.

Pyrrha scrambled to the cover of the wall, joining the soldiers ducking behind it. "We can't let Cinder escape!"

"We can't move with that sniper firing at us!" One of the Templars protested.

"Then we need to take down the sniper." Pyrrha decided. A shot hit the wall just above her head, sending bits of stone, dirt and shrapnel raining down on her and the nearby soldiers. Knowing she would have a short window before the next shot, Pyrrha peeked over the wall, scanning the ridge for the sniper. Bingo. She the glint of a scope shining at its top. Pyrrha ducked down again, just in
time as a bullet whizzed over her and struck the road beyond. "Top of the hill. Between the second and third boulders."

"Too far." A Templar warned. "Our guns don't have the range."

Pyrrha waited for another shot and peeked again, this time scanning the topography. "There's a cluster of trees to the right, should give you some cover, get you a little closer." She ducked down, again just in time. The Templars did not move. She was going to have to do it herself. "Cover me!"

Pyrrha leapt up, hopping over the wall. Ducking behind her shield, she raced for the trees. A shot struck at her feet, kicking up dirt, but she managed to make it to cover. Looking back she saw that no one had followed her. No matter. She was going to take out that sniper with or without backup. She looked up the ridge toward the cluster of boulders at the top. It was a long way, with no cover at all, the hillside only covered by short grass. There were no good options. All the approaches to the top of the ridge were just as exposed.

Pyrrha took a series of deep breaths, waiting. A shot slammed into the tree, sending splinters of bark flying. She rushed out from her covered position, ducking down behind her shield, running straight up the hill toward the sniper. The ground was uneven and steep, but she pressed on, even as a series of shots slammed into the metal of her shield, its meteorite core stopping the bullets. As Pyrrha neared her target the sniper stood, abandoning her prone position. She fired, hitting the shield near the edge, but still not penetrating it. Pyrrha was close, so close, almost there…

The sniper dropped her aim lower and fired. Pyrrha tumbled to the ground as a bullet punched through her bronze leg armor and sliced through her calf. She managed to hold onto her spear and shield, but dropped to all fours, and found herself facing down the sniper, who stood just meters away, rifle leveled at her. Their eyes met, the sniper's gaze oddly vacant, cold, almost as if she were not really seeing what was in front of her. She cycled the rifle's bolt, but hesitated. Everything seemed to slow down as Pyrrha stared down the barrel of the rifle. The sniper tensed and reached for the trigger.

A series of loud cracks rang out. The dirt at the sniper's feet was churned up, and the boulders behind her shed splinters of rock. The sniper turned her attention to the Templar soldiers, who had moved up to the trees, close enough to provide covering fire. With the sniper distracted, Pyrrha forced herself to her feet and lunged for the assailant. Pyrrha knocked the weapon aside with her shield. The sniper stumbled off balance and Pyrrha pushed forward, smashing her shield into the shooter's face.

Dropping her rifle, the sniper fell flat on her back in a daze. Pyrrha rushed forward, leveling her spear at the assailant's throat. Something was not right. Even as the injured sniper reached for her rifle, her expression remained blank, her eyes lifeless. She was acting as though she were desperate to kill Pyrrha and the Templars, yet she showed not the slightest hint of emotion. Keeping her spear pointed at the sniper, but not delivering the fatal blow, Pyrrha instead stepped on her wrist with one foot, and kicked the rifle away with the other.

Labored breaths and the clanking of gear announced the arrival of the Templars. "Specialist Zedong?!!" One of them gasped at the sight of the sniper.

"She's one of yours..." Pyrrha mumbled. "Restrain her." She ordered. Pyrrha scanned the landscape while the soldiers did as instructed. "Did anyone see where Cinder went?" No one responded. Pyrrha guessed she would be heading past the ridge, further into the island's wild interior. From there Cinder could follow a valley to the coast and a potential escape. Pyrrha started moving in that direction, but only managed a few steps before dropping to all fours. Now that the adrenaline was fading, her leg burned like a hot poker had been stabbed through it, and her head felt as though it
"Pyrrha, what's going on?" Glynda asked, having teleported to the scene after hearing the shots. "Gods you're bleeding!"

"Cinder escaped." Pyrrha groaned.

"Which way did she go?" Glynda asked. She knew Pyrrha would be alright, and Cinder would go on killing if allowed to get away.

Pyrrha nodded toward the forest beyond the ridge. "Not sure, that way I think."

Glynda knelt down, placing her hand on Pyrrha's back. "Okay, take it easy. I'll go after her."

As Glynda stood a low rumble echoed through the trees. A column of fire and smoke rose over the trees before them. Pyrrha gasped. "Gods…" Glynda hesitated before teleporting away. Pyrrha tried to stand, but pain overcame her. With adrenaline fading there was nothing to dull the pain, or to keep her going. Her vision blurred, then lost all color, before fading to black.

Cinder had but a moment to react as Yang charged towards her. With a wave of her hand, a column of dirt rose up, solidifying into a rough glass shield just before Yang slammed into it. Cinder struggled to hold the shield in place as Yang burned against it. It looked as though it would hold, until slowly, it began to give, flaking and cracking. Fear flashed in Cinder's eyes, and with a final punch from Yang, the shield disintegrated, a blinding flash engulfing Cinder as Yang's fist made contact.

Weiss watched as a column of smoke and fire rose above the clearing. The roiling fireball was mesmerizing, but Weiss' attention was soon drawn away by Cinder's desperate screams. Engulfed in flames, the vampire rolled around on the ground, crying out in pain. As the flames died down, so did her screams, until they were little more than agonized whimpers. Weiss shifted her focus to Myrtenaster, still impaling her, pinning her to the ground. She gripped the blade with her gloved hands, wrenched it free and tossed it aside.

"Gods Weiss, are you okay?!" Yang shouted. She returned to human form and crouched beside Weiss, helping her to a sitting position. "Did I burn you? I'm so sorry-"

"I'm fine, just a little singed around the edges." Weiss managed a smile. With one hand she gripped the wound in her gut, which sizzled as if the blade were still in place. "Just help me up." She draped her arm over Yang's shoulder, the aspect lifting her to her feet. Weiss started to bend down for her blade, but Yang stopped her.

"I've got it." Yang picked up Myrtenaster by the leather grip and handed it to Weiss. "What are you going to do?"

Weiss limped to Cinder, looming over her crippled, pathetic, whimpering form. "I should finish this."

"No, no don't kill her, please!" A woman's voice screamed from the edge of the clearing. Following it to the source, Weiss saw an olive-skinned, mint-haired woman rushing across the field. Yang tensed beside her, but she only rushed to Cinder, hunching over her.

"Get out of here before you get hurt too!" Yang growled.

"Haven't you done enough?!!" The girl cried, glaring through tears as she crouched over the injured
vampire. Cinder's wounds were extensive, her left arm barely more than bone, burned and blackened, her upper chest exposed, angry burns creeping from her stomach to her neck, before finally reaching her face, one eye burned and scabbed over, the other shut tight, bloody tears streaming down her face. "You...you monster, you *demon* this is sadistic!" The girl screamed.

Yang's fist clenched at the term, spat as an insult to her intentions.

Cinder coughed and wheezed. "*Emerald...run, run!*" She managed before choking again.

Emerald shushed her. "I'm *not* leaving you."

"She's just a thrall." Yang spat, looking to Weiss.

"*I am not her thrall!*" The girl screamed, surprising them both. "I am Emerald Sustrai, chosen love of Cinder Fall, and I will defend her with my life of my own free will!" Reaching behind her back, she drew two curved knives, holding them in shaking hands in a desperate bid to ward off further attack.

"She's not worth it." Yang hissed, moving to advance, but found herself halted by a hand on her shoulder.

"No, that's enough." Weiss murmured, a pitiful look in her eyes.

"But-" Yang started.

"She can't hurt anyone now." Weiss affirmed, pulling Yang back. The aspect huffed, then jumped as a flash of light filled the clearing, Glynda appearing before them, a fist full of lighting dispersing as she took in the scene before her. She looked in surprise at Cinder and Emerald, the latter quivering at her presence.

Glynda's gaze turned to Weiss, battered and bleeding, clutching her side. The witch sighed at Weiss' apologetic smile, reaching into her pocket to withdraw a vial of red liquid. "Ruby's." She specified, handing it to Weiss. She uncorked and down half the vial as fast as possible, even cooled it sent a shiver through her form. She splashed the rest on the wound in her abdomen, the burning sensation subsiding immediately.

Before any more could be said, the Templars thudded into the clearing, surrounding Cinder and Emerald with their rifles raised. Ironwood slowly entered, another soldier supporting him as his prosthetics struggled to function. "Good job Schnee." He praised.

"Yang did most of this." Weiss admitted. "What happens now?"

Ironwood replied with a heavy sigh, frowning at the newcomer. "Who is this?"

"Emerald Sustrai, Cinder's slave I assume." Weiss replied.

"*Fuck you*, stay the hell away-*EUGH!*" Emerald spasmed, back arching as a bolt of electricity struck her from Glynda's outstretched hand. Ironwood pointed at the soldier behind Emerald, who pulled her away, struggling weakly as control failed her, Cinder reaching desperately for her one source of comfort.

"Cinder Fall." Ironwood addressed with authority. "You have attempted to escape Templar custody." He reached for his hip, slipping a large handcannon from its holster. "In accordance with Templar Law, I sentence you to immediate execution." He extended his arm, aiming the weapon at Cinder's head, which did not rise, a single teary eye staring at Emerald's terrified gaze.
"N-no, no nooo!" Emerald screamed, and suddenly a shockwave burst through the clearing, a circular void appearing between the Templar and his target.

Fog spread forth from the portal, solidifying into the form of a tall, older woman, garbed in black, starkly contrasting with her ivory hair and unnaturally pale skin. 'Stay your hand Templar." She ordered, calmly but coldly.

Ironwood hesitated. Weiss looked to the woman, then back to the general, the look on his face shifting from cold resolution to subtle fear. Even Glynda seemed unnerved. Taking a deep breath, Ironwood let his arm fall, holsting his weapon. "Salem."

The woman ignored him, bending down to her fallen daughter. Cinder let out a sob. Salem cupped her face, then looked to Emerald, who sat awestruck. Her handler having released her in surprise, Emerald scrambled to return, kneeling before the Nosferatu, who rose, trailing a hand through the human's hair as she did. No one, not the Templars, nor Glynda, not even Yang moved a muscle. "I feel my daughter has suffered enough." Salem stated. Weiss felt a far less pleasant shiver as the vampire's gaze caught her own. "I have come to take her home."

Weiss swallowed, taking a shaky breath. "Someone must answer for her crimes." She protested. Red irises bored into Weiss, glowing in the darkness of black sclera. Weiss felt the urge to scream, to flee in terror, but stood firm.

"If you wish to punish someone, take Mercury, the parasite is not under my protection." Salem calmly stated. "If you hurry, you may catch him before he escapes this island." Her expression softened, appraising Weiss head to toe, fixing her with a curious gaze. "Hmm...bravery such as yours is rare. To challenge me shows a strength of will, or great foolishness." She praised. "I sense great power burning within you, potential wasted upon these humans..." Salem seemed to almost float forward, towering over Weiss, who struggled to maintain her composure, Yang's warm hand her anchor. "Come with me, and I will teach you to harness your true potential."

Weiss trembled, fear strangling her heart as panic threatened to prevail. "N-no." She stammered. "Please no." She barely whispered.

Salem did not flinch. "A pity." Not a hint of emotion flickered upon her porcelain features. "With my guidance you could accomplish greatness." Much to Weiss' relief, Salem strode back to Emerald and Cinder, standing between them. She shot a glance at Ironwood, who took a step back. "I apologize for the trouble my daughter has caused." Not a person in the clearing had been expecting that. "She will cause no more, you have my word." The trio burst into mist, sinking back into the black void, which disappeared as quickly as it had formed.

Silence reigned supreme, as sense slowly returned to the clearing's occupants. Glynda was the first to speak. "Yang, there are wounded that need assistance. Can you help Blake and I transport them?"

"Of course." Yang nodded.

"Weiss, are you going to be alright?" Glynda asked. The vampire did not respond, staring blankly at the spot upon which Salem had stood. "Weiss."

"W-what?" Weiss stuttered.

"Are you well enough to leave?" Glynda extended her hand, taking Yang's with the other.

Weiss shook herself, then took hold. "I am."
With a flash, they disappeared.
Aftercare

Chapter by RealTerminal

Chapter Summary

"What...you should have joined her?"

With a flash, Glynda appeared in the living room. Ruby leapt to her feet from the couch and nearly cried out at the sight before her. Weiss was clutching her side, stained with blood, an equally bloody gash across her left eye, which had swollen shut. Yang held an unconscious Nora, Blake holding Ren, but in Glynda's arms lay Pyrrha, head wrapped in a bloody bandage, which dripped on the floor.

"Pyrrha!" Ruby cried. "Weiss! What-"

"Ruby, calm." Glynda interrupted. "Blake, Yang, take them to the guest room. Weiss, take a seat and rest." She ordered. As the aspects left the room she gestured for Ruby to follow her, taking Pyrrha to the kitchen and laying her on the table. "Ruby, Pyrrha will be fine. She needs stitches, and may have a concussion."

"What happened!?" Ruby yelled, clutching at Pyrrha's limp hand.

"The escort was ambushed by Cinder's accomplice and their thrall." Glynda explained, turning Pyrrha's head to the side and peeling back the soaked bandages.

"And they did this?" Ruby warbled, heart clenching as her mistress flinched and whimpered in her sleep.

"The thrall was a sniper in a superior position." Glynda explained. "Pyrrha, in her wisdom, decided to charge her anyway." Opening her kit, Glynda withdrew a bottle of antiseptic, more bandages, scissors, a needle and thread. "Take off her boots." She instructed. Ruby glanced down at Pyrrha's leg to note one of them dripping with more blood, the metal plating punctured with a clean hole. Letting go of Pyrrha's hand, she reached to unclasp the straps holding on her greaves, allowing her to gently remove them and the boots beneath. "The bullet went straight through. The wound needs to be cleaned and bandaged...what are you doing?"

Ruby lay her hands on either side of the wound, eyes shut tight. She reached out toward Pyrrha's essence, focused on the wound, and for the first time felt true strain. Healing Pyrrha's fatigue was easy. Muscles were eaten away in miniscule amounts, regenerating them took all the effort of breathing. This was different, with muscle and flesh torn asunder, traumatized, throbbing. Ruby was not used to this strain, and grit her teeth as she knit the wound closed in her mind's eye, until finally letting go, opening her eyes to find the flesh bloodied, but seemingly whole, a star of scar tissue where the entry wound had been. Inspecting the exit wound, which had been much less clean, she found it too closed with with jagged scar tissue.

"It worked." Ruby huffed, not realizing she was out of breath until she did so.

"Ruby, are you okay?" Glynda asked.
Ruby shook off the fatigue and circled the table. "I'm fine." She reached out to Pyrrha's face, placing her hands on either side of the wound at her temple.

"Are you certain-" Glynda started.

"I'm fine!" Ruby snapped, closing her eyes and reaching out with her mind once more. It was far more difficult this time. The wound was far more sensitive, the bone bruised and chipped by impact. She could feel the trauma inflicted upon Pyrrha's brain, but dared not attempt to heal that, lest she do something wrong. Flesh was simple, flesh was like cloth, muscles knitting together like fibers to create thread, skin like a protective cloth, but this weaving was far more stressful than any clothing she had formed, and by the time she felt it was done, she readily fell into Glynda's arms, breathing heavily, dizzy from exertion.

"Stubborn...how do you feel now?" Glynda inquired.

"I'm...tired...don't take me away." Ruby pleaded drowsily.

Glynda sighed, setting Ruby in one of the chairs and pushing her closer to her sleeping mistress, where she latched onto Pyrrha's hand. "You're as bad as each other." Glynda murmured, running the sink's hot water tap and opening the cupboard to take a bowl.

Blake whispered in Glynda's mind, evaluating Nora and Ren's injuries - severe silver-smoke inhalation for Ren, minor for Nora, silver burns to the eyes of both though far worse for Nora, and shrapnel wounds to Nora's legs. Nora's condition was far more serious, having absorbed the bulk of the blast by throwing Ren out of the way. Most of Ren's injuries occurred when he dragged Nora from the deadly smoke. Blake would have no trouble treating the shrapnel, but the smoke effects would make for a long and painful recovery for both werewolves.

"When you feel better, clean the blood from her skin and remove her clothes." Glynda instructed, placing the bowl and a cloth on the table before Ruby. "I will bring her sleepwear." Ruby groaned in response. Filling another bowl, Glynda returned to the living room, finding Weiss still by herself, staring into the hearth's flames. "Would you like to feed first, or second?"

Weiss sighed shakily, reaching to rub at her eye, before freezing. "It's going to scar."

"It is." Glynda confirmed. Usually, injuries suffered by vampires repaired themselves without scars, but those inflicted by silver and fire were different.

"It burns." Weiss whined.

"Hmm." Glynda hummed.

"I should have listened to you." Weiss admitted.

"You should have." Glynda said. "But you didn't."

"I'm sorry." Weiss apologized.

"I know Weiss." Glynda set the bowl aside and undid the top few buttons of her shirt. "Come here, the sooner the better."

Weiss obeyed with another sigh, turning to the witch and shuffling closer. She still hated how much the idea of feeding appealed to her. She could already feel her heart beating faster, Glynda's scent growing stronger, her mouth watering as Glynda gently guided her closer. "Thank you." She whispered, before allowing her fangs to sink into Glynda's neck.
Glynda grunted. "It's okay Weiss, take all you need."

When Glynda ambled into the guest room, holding a bandage to her throat, Yang decided it was time to return to her partner. She could not, and would not pretend the day's events had not shaken her. Weiss asked her to restrain herself, both as she talked to Cinder, and again as she confronted her, and for the sake of faith Yang had obeyed, no matter how much she desired to reduce the vampire to a pile of ash. Indeed, the only reason Cinder survived the attack had been Yang's sheer panic, fear of losing Weiss, fear of incinerating them both by accident, had tempered her fire.

And Yang was beyond thankful for it. She had taken enough from the world...so much, too much to forgive. If she took Weiss? She feared her flame would either be extinguished, or left so rampant that Patch would be reduced to a graveyard of ash, all left of Yang Xiao-Long fluttering away upon the sea winds. But now Yang was angry, at Weiss for endangering herself, at Cinder for harming her love, for being so close to justice, yet so far, saved by one of the few beings in all of Remnant that Yang truly feared, but most of all she was angry at herself, for allowing it all to happen. She could have killed Cinder at any time, she could have reduced her to ash the moment she reformed, but she did not. She chose to let Weiss endanger herself. That would not happen again.

As Yang entered the room, she noticed her partner had not moved, still staring into the hearth's flames. Her hair was bedraggled, her clothing singed and dirty, and as she circled around she noted the droplets of blood on her shirt. But her face was devoid of the substance, owing to the bowl of murky water on the table before her, and the cloth pressed over her newly injured brow. Weiss did not seem to notice Yang's approach until she had taken a seat, flinching when the aspect lay a hand on her shoulder. Weiss' gaze was both shocked and dazed, sclera dull, but not pitch black, firelight gleaming, setting her sight alight.

"Snowball?" Yang asked softly. "Are you okay?"

Weiss quirked a pained smile, answering instead by leaning into Yang's touch, until she was safely tucked into Yang's side. Anger be damned, care came first. "Cinder was right." Weiss murmured. "No, gods no...no it's the feeding." Weiss explained. "She was right, it doesn't compare. Compared to my first, compared to Ruby? Glynda was like stale bread. Ruby was like...rich Mistrali delight, after a glass of fine wine...it has put things in perspective. I think I understand her better now."

"What's there to understand?" Yang growled. "She was a monster. She hunted virgins for the thrill."

Weiss shook her head. "I don't think so, not really. That was just what she told Glynda, what she admitted to herself."

"Admitted...what, she was lying to herself?" Yang pressed.

"She was in denial." Weiss confirmed. "At least, she was until confronted by me. You saw how she acted around Glynda. She was bored, rehearsed. She was a vampire hunting human prey, virgins for the thrill of it. Typical, easy to digest. She didn't care if people judged her for that." Yang felt Weiss sigh against her neck. "When Cinder looked at me, it was like I was a dream come true. She completely changed, surprised, unguarded. It felt like I was watching the Cinder I fell in love with break down before me, not this monster who took my heart on a whim."

"You...seriously believe she loved you?" Yang asked.
"I believe she believed it." Weiss nodded. "She believed she loved all of her victims, and I believe that rationalizing what she did was the only thing that kept her sane, and that sanity cracked when confronted by my survival. She lost her composure, let snippets of the truth flow, tried to make me understand why she did the things she did, the pain she felt from it, the regret and sorrow."

Yang scoffed at that. "Well excuse me for not being so ready to feel sorry for the crazy vampire bitch who tried to kill you twice. She could have stopped at any time, but she kept going."

"Because insane individuals are in control of their rationality." Weiss snarked, rolling her eyes, wincing as the swollen one twitched. "Perhaps I'm a bleeding heart, perhaps my pity has tempered my ire. Perhaps the thought of a woman I fell in love with truly suffering saddens me." Weiss' voice grew thick. Yang felt a surge of jealousy but swallowed it. It was difficult hearing the woman she loved empathize with her attempted murderer, let alone her former lover. The hatred she felt for the monster refused to die, even as Weiss tried to douse the flames with her empathy. "Cinder may well have been a good person once. Perhaps the girl who threw herself in front of us truly loved her...I wish things had been different. I wish we could have met under different circumstances. Perhaps we could have been friends. But it seems fate is cruel to us all."

That much Yang could not disagree with. Sure, Weiss had a point, a few even. Vampires were not born evil, they were raised or turned that way, and even so their society was fairly passive as far as blood sucking monsters go. Maybe Cinder was just an unfortunate, tattered soul who fell to a danger plaguing all of her kind. Maybe, just maybe, she could empathize with that a little, but at least Yang had no choice when summoned, when bound, her will was that of her master or mistress...or maybe Cinder had it worse. Yang was aware it was not her own choice, but Cinder's own mind had betrayed her, seemingly. Yang did not know what to think, but Weiss at least had one thing right, Cinder was not such a clear cut monster. But she could still hate her like one.

"Don't ask me to hold back again." Yang changed the subject. "This is the third time I've watched you almost die...from now on we stand together, we fight together, and if it comes to that we fall together."

"I think I've had enough fall in my life." Weiss murmured.

"Shut up, I'm trying to be serious." Yang tried to chastise, but the giggles against her chest made it impossible to be genuine.

"I'm sorry...never again, I think I've learned my lesson." Weiss apologized. "So long as you are by my side, I can do anything." Removing the cloth from her eye, she hissed. "Gods...damnit that burns...I guess I won't ever be perfection again." She joked bitterly.

Yang scoffed. "Are you kidding? That's just another thing mortals get that we don't. We go through rough battles and come out unscathed. You? You'll carry that scar for the rest of your life, eternal proof you survived and grew from this day." She cupped Weiss' cheek, careful to avoid the wound itself, but soothing the swelling. "You will always be perfection to me."

Weiss' lip quivered, she laughed, then hissed as salty tears ran into the cut. "Stop being so perfect yourself." She whined, clutching at Yang's chest. "I love you too much already."

"Wait until you hear how much I love you." Yang chuckled. "It'd probably make Blakey blush."

Weiss scoffed. "That'll be the day."

Calmed and content, Yang had allowed Weiss some space, retreating into the familiar hearth once
more. She was surprised at the lack of damage to the living room. Her flames normally burned bright and hot, and her dramatic and fiery entrance had only occurred a few days prior. Glynda had seemingly gone over everything with a fine-toothed comb, not a singe was left. Yang often found herself impressed with the power of humans, and this was no exception. Seriously, even the rug was intact. What the hell did she do? Time dilation? Could humans reverse time now? Did Glynda keep spares of everything she owned? The more Yang thought about it the more confused she got, until the front door bursting open startled her, causing her to flail out of the hearth and scramble to her feet, a panicked ball of flame held poised to attack, until Winter Schnee stood at the living room's entrance, panting and flustered.

"I came as quickly as I could!" Winter wheezed, bracing herself against the door frame. "Weiss are you…" She cut herself off, finally catching sight of Weiss and her condition. "My gods." She gasped.

"Winter, it's okay." Weiss tried to placate her sister, though the effect was mitigated by the swollen gash across her eye.

"Okay?!" Winter's voice cracked. She pushed off her support to approach her injured sister, distraught. "Okay is unharmed. Okay is not scaring the living hell out of me!" She knelt down, cupping Weiss' face with shaking hands. "Ironwood told me you were involved, but he neglected to inform me of your injuries. What happened?" She turned to glare at Yang. "You were supposed to protect her!" Winter hissed, only to start at the sudden vice grip on her wrist, and the equally cold single-eyed glare of her sister.

"Yang saved my life, no thanks to my own actions." Weiss sternly lectured, before softening her grip. "It was my idea to follow, it was at my request that I fought Cinder alone, and were it not for her interference, we would not be having this discussion. She saved my life Winter, she deserves your gratitude, not your ire."

Winter sighed, bowing her head. She rubbed her eyes before turning to face the aspect. "I apologize Yang...this is a taxing situation."

"Yeah, it is, and we're trying to relax after it." Yang admonished.

Winter nodded. "Right...I shall...make us some tea then."

Pyrrha awoke slowly, groggy and groaning, the dull light from her window illuminating the room, stinging her deprived eyes. She grimaced, a dull ache in her leg and skull becoming evident, contrasted by a comfortable warmth pressed against her side. She blinked blearily at the crimson in her peripheral to find Ruby's delicate features sleeping silently, an odd occurrence. Ruby rarely slept. She had the ability, but found it boring, generally preferring to snuggle with Pyrrha until she fell asleep, before returning to her reading. A part of Pyrrha was saddened that Ruby did not stay in her arms, but it was made up for by the warm smile and eager embrace when she awoke, not to mention the fresh brewed coffee.

The aches in Pyrrha's body pulsed with her increasing heart rate, growing in pain, sickly and unpleasant. She groaned, raising her free hand to rub at the offending location, only for it to explode in pain. Reeling, agonized, a wave of nausea swept through her system, bile rising through her throat. She desperately lurched to the side of the bed, slipping from beneath her summon to avoid hurling on the bed. She barely saw the floorboard before her eyes shut, and her stomach made a volatile escape.

The sounds of liquid splashing against metal would have confused Pyrrha, had she not been in
several sorts of agony. She choked, cracking open her eyes to find a bucket had been placed below her. A gentle hand rubbed circles on her back. She would have smiled, had she not suddenly vomited once more. Gods she hated being sick. Even worse was the pain in her skull, throbbing angrily as blood rushed to her head. She sobbed.

"It's okay Pyrrha." Ruby soothed. "It's just a concussion...you're gonna' be okay."

Pyrrha groaned in response, head hanging over the bucket as she awaited the next attack, though it never seemed to come. A towel appeared in her peripheral, and she took it, wiping her face of the various fluids that escaped during the ordeal, before slowly rolling over onto her back. She blinked up at Ruby, who smiled gently down at her.

"Feel better?" Ruby asked.

Pyrrha could not lie, panting, closing her eyes and trying to will away the pain. "It hurts." With a pang, worried realization shot through her clouded mind. "Cinder!" She gasped, trying to push herself up, but Ruby held her down firmly.

"Cinder is gone, Pyrrha, she's gone." Ruby informed.

"Gone?" Pyrrha felt fear clench her heart, and Ruby hastily shook her head.

"As in gone...gone...uh." Ruby considered her words. Grabbing a pillow, she gently coaxed Pyrrha's head upward to wedge it beneath. "Weiss and Yang followed you, because they thought something might happen, and they were right. So when Cinder escaped they followed her, and Weiss tried to fight her but she's alright." Ruby hurriedly assured. "She got hurt, but Yang saved her, and Cinder was hurt bad, but this girl came out of nowhere and started begging for her life, but then the Templars arrived, and they were gonna' kill her anyway, but then a Nosferatu, Salem, appeared and took Cinder away. She said Cinder wouldn't be a problem anymore. I don't know what that means really, but Glynda said it doesn't worry her, so it probably means it's fine. I don't know, I wasn't there." Taking Pyrrha's hand, she clutched it close to her heart, closing her eyes.

"What about Ren and Nora?" Pyrrha asked.

When Ruby looked up, her eyes were shimmering. "They have silver poisoning. They'll be okay, I think, I don't know. I was tired, and worried, and scared Pyrrha. I tried to heal you and I think I did it right but I don't know. I-I've never healed wounds before, I just..." Ruby shuddered.

Pyrrha's heart ached, her eyes stinging again. She pulled her summon to lay at her side, reaching around to stroke her hair soothingly. "I'm alright Ruby, I'm here, I'm alive."

"I was so scared." Ruby shivered. "We heard the shooting, Glynda left me to get all the medical supplies out, and when she got back you were unconscious and bleeding and all I could think about was what you said to me, and I didn't say it to you, and I just wanted you to be okay." She rambled, half muffled in Pyrrha's chest.

Pyrrha felt guilt at her summon's pain. There was no one to blame but herself, her recklessness, she was shot in the head, an inch, a millimeter even, and she would have died, and yet she charged headlong into certain death regardless, not giving a single thought as to what could happen. She was a fool, a damned fool. "I'm sorry Ruby, I wasn't thinking clearly." She whispered.

"Please don't do that again." Ruby sobbed. "I don't know what I'd be without you."

"I promise, I'm not going to leave you...you're...you're important to me Ruby." Pyrrha struggled. "I care for you very deeply."
"I care for you too." Ruby sniffled. "Do...do you think you can eat? You lost a lot of blood, you need the nutrients."

Pyrrha felt like she could eat a horse, but at the same time, eating meant moving, and she was not sure that was wise right now. "Perhaps later, Ruby. I'd like some time to wake up first."

"Would you like some water?" Ruby asked.

To rinse the taste of vomit from her mouth? Yes, but that would mean Ruby leaving. "Soon, Ruby, soon...let us rest for a while, together."

"Oh, sure." Ruby perked up at that, snuggling back into Pyrrha's side. "I like being together." She murmured.

Pyrrha smiled, managing a chuckle. "Me too Ruby, me too."
Chapter Summary

"A peace born of fear is a thin shield at best."

After all the excitement of the prior day, a slow morning was sorely needed. Pyrrha lazed in bed with Ruby for the better part of two hours, revelling in the simple comfort of intimacy. She had never experienced this before in her life, always sleeping alone. She had no sisters, no close childhood friends. The closest consistent company she ever experienced were coaches and trainers, for some of whom she developed a fondness. She could not deny that her life had been a lonesome one. Until she came to Patch there was so much moving around, training, tournaments, study. Every day of her life had been dedicated to growing stronger, all for prestige, the entertainment of others. It had left so little time to pursue meaningful bonds.

Pyrrha remembered well the day she had awoken to a feeling of hollowness, depression. Along with it came a greater awareness of the world around her, the pain and struggles of her spectators' daily lives. The idea that she was living a life of comfort, wasting her skills in the ring while people were suffering in the wilderness without protectors, had sickened her. And though her journey had been far from painless, lying there that morning Pyrrha was thankful for it, that she could simply smile and be content, if only for a short while, in the arms of someone for whom she had come to care. For the first time in her life she did not feel alone. Not in the slightest.

Eventually Pyrrha allowed Ruby to help her up, leaning on the small but strong summon to keep weight off her still sensitive leg, which ached at even the slightest exertion. She chose to forgo dressing, and her normal morning exercises were out of the question. Today would be spent in rest, and her sleepwear was far more comfortable than her usual attire, if potentially revealing. A silken slip left little to the imagination, but so long as there were no stiff gales blowing through the house, her modesty would be spared.

The halls were warm as Ruby led her to the bathroom. Glynda's insulation wards worked well to trap the heat, and Yang's presence generated yet more. Even the normally frigid tiled room was pleasant. Ruby waited patiently as Pyrrha relieved herself, deciding to skip a bath for breakfast instead. Given the lack of morning exercises, she could have one in the evening instead. Perhaps with some candles, and one of Weiss' scented bombs. And a face mask. And a glass of wine. And some chocolate.

As Ruby and Pyrrha approached the kitchen, voices became clearer - Winter's, to Pyrrha's surprise, and Yang's. "It's still not bubbling." Winter complained.

"Just be patient." Yang advised.

Ruby and Pyrrha peeked through the doorway to find an odd sight - Winter huddled over the stove, a sizzling pan between herself and Yang, absentmindedly poking at the flickering flames beneath the implement. Weiss watched from the kitchen table, a cup of coffee in hand and a muffin on the plate before her. "Were my measurements correct?" Winter fretted.
Yang rolled her eyes. "They don't have to be exact Winter. You can eyeball everything."

"You said this was similar to alchemy." Winter snarked. "You need to be exact in alchemy. You cannot just eyeball everything."

"I just drew a comparison." Yang defended.

"Well it was an inaccurate comparison." Winter mumbled.

"Your face is an inaccurate comparison." Yang shot back.

"What...that doesn't even...what even does that mean?" Winter blustered.

"What even does - did I break you already?" Yang smirked.

Weiss chuckled, shaking her head, turning to Pyrrha and Ruby with a smile. "Pyrrha, Ruby, good morning." She greeted, setting down her coffee to stand. "It's a relief to see you upright." Pyrrha almost gasped as she took in Weiss' appearance - the angry slice across her left eye, bruised, swollen shut, contrasting with her bright smile. "I know, horrifying isn't it? You should see my side. I've got a porthole." She joked, patting her abdomen.


Weiss scoffed. "Yes, as are you." She glanced at the side of Pyrrha's head.

Pyrrha had neglected to examine the wound in the mirror, or rather the scar that apparently remained, still throbbing with her heartbeat. She was not concerned with disfigurement, but a part of her simply did not wish to confront that as of yet. It was one thing to know she had narrowly escaped death, it was another to stare at the evidence. She smiled weakly. "Mistakes were made."

"And yet we survive." Weiss huffed a chuckle.

"Probably to thrive, if Winter doesn't burn the pancakes." Yang interjected.

"I flipped them!" Winter snapped, turning to regard Pyrrha. "Good morning Pyrrha, I apologize for being unable to assist you."

"There is no need Winter, you were not at fault." Pyrrha waved off the apology.

"Forgive me for my stubbornness, but my absence was voluntary." Winter noted. "General Ironwood had no authority over me. I should have come."

"What is done is done." Weiss soothed. "We are here, we are alive, battered or no."

"Some more than others." Winter murmured, returning to the pan. Weiss rolled her eyes, returning to her seat.

Pyrrha patted Ruby's shoulder, limping over to the pantry. "Are you hungry Weiss?" Ruby asked, taking a seat at the table.

Weiss smiled, shaking her head. "No Ruby, Glynda provided for me yesterday, but thank you."

"Not even a few drops for your coffee?" Ruby pressed.

"I prefer my coffee without sugar, thank you." Weiss joked. Yang snorted.
"You fed from Ruby?" Winter questioned.

"I did, it was an experiment." Weiss confirmed.

"It was something." Yang could barely contain a laugh.

"It was a success, and that is what matters." Weiss rolled her eyes.

"Where are Nora and Ren?" Pyrrha asked, returning to the table with a muffin of her own, and several cookies for Ruby, who munched on them cheerfully.

"The guest room." Yang answered. "Blakey's watching over them."

"Ruby told me they suffered silver poisoning." Pyrrha added.

"Nora got the brunt of the shrapnel pushing Ren out of the way, and silver burns to her eyes." Yang explained. "We don't know if she'll be able to see again, but Glynda's hopeful. Ren inhaled a bunch dragging her away, he's in really bad shape too."

"How are we treating them?" Pyrrha asked.

"By keeping them comfortable and well fed." Winter replied. "Until the silver has been filtered out of their systems, regeneration will be impaired."

"I take it you studied werewolf physiology during your Templar years?" Pyrrha theorized.

"Only insofar as how to kill them most effectively." Winter admitted. "Silver smoke is extremely effective for a reason. It was designed with werewolves in mind." She scooped up a slightly overcooked pancake from the pan, grimacing. "A vampire will be weakened, but their undead nature allows them to regenerate quickly, and slow respiration prevents much ingestion. Werewolves are cursed, but otherwise natural, living beings. They suffer, they slow, and if not hunted down by pursuing Templars, they fall victim to Grimm or Huntsmen."

"It's cruel." Ruby commented, visibly sickened.

"The world is cruel Ruby." Winter sighed. "The kind are victimized and exploited day after day by many beings of great and terrible power. Yes, on rare occasion, Templar methods cause collateral damage, but if they held back even once when extreme force was required, the world might lose faith in their protectors. Vampires, for all their power, are kept in check by the sheer strength of the Order. Atlas remains Remnant's greatest authority due to this. To falter is to invite chaos to spread across the land, and no one wants another Dark Age, let alone another Great War."

"A peace born of fear is a thin shield at best." Pyrrha suggested.

"Perhaps, but the right wrong in the right place can be the difference between a murder and a massacre." Winter declared. "Life is not black and white. Ren and Nora accepted the risks when they worked with Templars, as you should have when you became a Huntress. A vampire enthralled one of our own. At any point the general could have been assassinated, the entire camp might have been rigged with explosives. It is purely due to whatever mercy compelled Cinder that I and any other Templar stand this day. If we hold back against that kind of power, we lose our advantage."

Winter sighed, leaning against the kitchen counter. For the first time since Ruby met her, she seemed almost vulnerable. "We are a weak species Ruby, frail and fragile, a single unlucky fall from death. In order to survive we must be careful, and more ruthless than the world. Cruel or no, it is a
sad necessity. Or else we might all become cattle to vampires, fodder for Grimm, and subject to every other manner of victimization the world can inflict upon us. One day you will understand. You are young, in human experience at least, but with time the world teaches harsh lessons to us all. Weiss and I suffered ours young, for better or worse, and time and time again we are reminded. I hope your life is kinder, I hope yours is softer, but life has rarely rewarded my hope. Indeed, it seems to take joy in dashing it." She finished morosely, leaving the room silent. "Would you like some coffee Pyrrha?" She finally attempted to change the subject.

"Please." Pyrrha nodded.

"Can't we just make pancakes without being depressing?" Yang groaned.

"Nothing is stopping you." Weiss smirked.

"Winter has the spatula." Yang countered.

"So take it from her." Weiss suggested.

"Get your own." Winter snarked.

"*Get your own." Yang mocked.

Weiss sighed.

Winter's pancakes aside, breakfast was refreshing. The coffee sparked Pyrrha's energy, the muffin filled her empty stomach, and in spite of the more depressing subject discussed beforehand, Winter and Yang's continual banter lifted her spirits. All in all, Pyrrha felt prepared to visit her injured companions.

They would be in pain. Pyrrha assumed Glynda had provided them with painkillers, but even in their current state a werewolf would burn through them quite fast. A double dosage would hopefully suffice. Dried poppy, a hint of wolfsbane, and several herbs to boost their immune systems, all ground up into a fine paste, and diluted in milk and sweetened with honey. Glynda likely would not have gone to the same lengths to make the potions palatable, but Pyrrha felt her friends deserved as much consideration as possible. They would be in enough discomfort without being forced to swallow a bitter poultice.

Gathering fresh bandages, a bowl of warm water and a cloth, Pyrrha made her way down the hall, Ruby in tow. The ache in her leg was subsiding, though still discomforting. She limped along with Ruby poised to catch her should she fall. The summon had her own idea of how to assist the werewolves, or Nora at least. A stuffed bear, found forgotten in a dusty corner during her exploration of the home. It had been in a sorry state when discovered, several holes and splits in the seams. It was either well loved and long forgotten, or somehow neglect had taken a physical toll on the poor doll.

Glynda was unaware of the bear's origin, and Blake likewise had no memory of it. So Ruby took it, washed it, gave it new stuffing, and sewed and patched every hole and seam until it looked brand new. She found it interesting, and so it came to sit on the nightstand. But now Ruby had found a new potential use for it. Human children took comfort in such toys, why not a wounded werewolf? It seemed so simple to Ruby, something soft and cuddly to distract from the harsh and painful. Pyrrha could only smile at her optimism.

With a knock, Ruby opened the door, and Pyrrha entered. It was dim, but not dark. Blake sat in a chair by the bedside, a book in one hand, and Nora's hand in the other. The blinded werewolf
twitched at their entry. "Who's that?" She whispered, her eyes weeping tears from beneath the bandages that covered them.

"Pyrrha and Ruby." Blake answered, closing the book to stand, Nora's hand raising along with her. "Glynda needs me." She stated. Nora attempted a small smile, letting her go with a squeeze. Blake surprised Pyrrha by embracing her. "It's good to see you awake." She whispered. "She's attempting to remain optimistic, but the situation terrifies her. Keep her calm, keep her distracted, and don't let Ren speak." She instructed, ruffling Ruby's hair as she left the room, leaving them alone.

"Pyrrha, Ruby?" Nora called softly. "Are you still there? I can't hear too well either."

"Yes Nora, I apologize." Pyrrha quickly made her way to Nora's side, setting down her supplies on the bedside table to take up her hand.

"Apologize?" Nora questioned. "Silly, you're alive and you're here. I heard you got shot and I was so worried. I'm sorry I couldn't help."

"You have nothing to be sorry for Nora." Pyrrha soothed, reaching up to brush some stray hair from her forehead. Her temperature was boiling. "I saw what you did, it was very brave."

Nora coughed a laugh. "I got blown up. Renny had to drag me away while everyone else did the fighting."

"You threw yourself in harms way to save the man you love." Pyrrha countered.

"I could have done better." Nora sighed.

"You can't expect better of yourself under those circumstances." Pyrrha insisted. "We were taken off guard by an enemy we had no way of anticipating. It's a miracle no one died."

"But we might have." Nora persisted.

"We might die any day Nora, but for now we live, and we must be thankful for that." Pyrrha declared.

"I don't feel very alive right now." Nora winced.

"Let me change your bandages, and I can give you more painkillers." Pyrrha offered.

"Ugh, that stuff is nasty." Nora complained.

"I know, I mixed it with milk and honey to help." Pyrrha noted.

"Gods, you're a saint." Nora praised.

"I try." Pyrrha chuckled. She made to unwrap the bandages, but once again Nora's hand held fast. "Nora, I'll need both hands for this, please." Nora's lips drew tight, but she obeyed.

Ruby took the opportunity to step forward. "I brought you a teddy. It might not help with the pain, but you can squeeze it to feel safe." She pressed the toy forward. Nora's hands fumbled to grasp it about the stomach. The resulting smile seemed far more genuine.

"I love teddy bears." Nora murmured. "Thank you Ruby. Are they a he or a she?" She asked. Pyrrha used the distraction to begin unwrapping the bandages.

"Uh...I don't know." Ruby replied.
"Well, I don't feel anything down there, so let's call her a she." Nora winced as the final loop came free, leaving two patches over her eyes. "What should we call her?"

"Well...I don't know." Ruby answered. "How do we name someone?"

"Most people name children after family, or looks, or something meaningful." Nora explained. "How did your name come about-ng."

Pyrrha gently removed the patches, revealing Nora's eyes, clenched shut at the sudden change. "Sorry." Pyrrha whispered, placing the soaked patches aside and taking up a cloth from the bowl, wringing it dry. "She glowed red when I summoned her. A ruby was the first thing that came to mind." She began dabbing at Nora's face, wiping away the bloody tears, gradually closing in on her eyes, angry red coloring the lids, yellow discharge gathered around the edges. "Describe the unique aspects of the teddy Ruby."

"She was stuffed in a corner when I found her, dusty and split." Ruby started. "I sewed up a few holes, but one needed to be patched. I used an old handkerchief Pyrrha didn't need. It was purple, with black printing."

"There we go, Mrs. Hanky!" Nora grinned. Pyrrha soaked and wring the cloth once more, and began dabbing at Nora's eyes. The werewolf hissed, squeezing the bear tight. "It's not working, but at the same time it is."

"Almost done, then I can put in some eyedrops." Pyrrha soothed, gently wiping away the last of the discharge. "Can you open your eyes for me please?"

Nora huffed, slowly obeying, fresh tears spilling forth as she struggled to open her irritated eyelids. Her normally vibrant blue irises were milky and pitted, her sclera angry red, victims of burst blood vessels. It looked extremely painful. "Give it to me straight doc, I don't look great do I?" She managed a shaky smirk.

Pyrrha sighed, smiling sadly as she dunked an eyedropper into the anesthetic mixture. "You look like you stared at Yang for too long." She joked.

Nora snorted, only to be interrupted by a hacking cough from her left, as Ren's lungs struggled to cope with the chuckle Pyrrha had coaxed forth. "Renny? Sweetie?" Nora croaked, clouded eyes flickering over to her pained partner. She abandoned Mrs. Hanky, turning onto her side to lay a hand on Ren's chest, rubbing soothingly. "Pyrrha's here, she can help!"

"One moment." Pyrrha placated, filling a cup with the painkiller and hurrying around the bed. She knelt by Ren's side, waiting for the injured werewolf to settle, Nora's lost gaze searching for her all the while. "Ren, when you believe you are ready, nod for me."

Ren began to settle, taking shallow, wheezing breaths, expression tight, teeth gritted. Ren's trembling free hand clenched across his chest, and Pyrrha lay a hand atop it, squeezing gently. She was surprised when it snapped open, tracing its unsteady way up her arm to her shoulder, where it gripped firmly. Ren gulped in air slowly, until his breathing was some semblance of calm, and nodded.

"Open your mouth." Pyrrha instructed, moving the cup closer. When Ren obeyed she slowly angled it to touch his lips. When the liquid touched his tongue he flinched, then relaxed, anticipating the harsh flavor of Glynda's dosage only to be met with a mild sweetness with a slight bitter aftertaste. He gulped it down greedily, nearly chasing the cup when it was taken away. He managed a weak smile, squeezing Pyrrha's shoulder and patting it in thanks. "You're welcome,
now rest." She ordered, returning Ren's gesture. "I won't be going anywhere...Ruby."

"Yes mistress?" Ruby chirped.

"I am dedicating myself to the care of Ren and Nora." Pyrrha answered, returning to Nora's side. "Full time." Picking up the eyedropper again, she cupped Nora's cheek. "Three drops, eyes wide open."

Nora obeyed, blinking as each eye was treated. She sighed as relief slowly set in. "Thank you." She whispered as Pyrrha set the dropper aside, refilling the cup.

"Anything you need, ask, don't think you can ask too much of me." Pyrrha promised as she held the cup to Nora's mouth. The female werewolf drank far easier than Ren. "Ruby, I need you to alleviate pressure from Glynda. Normally both myself and Weiss assist her when required, but between recovery and commitments neither of us will be fit to do so."

"I can do that." Ruby agreed.

"I know you can." Pyrrha smiled, setting aside the empty cup. She picked up fresh patches, placing them to soak in the herbal water. "Just do as Blake says, and Glynda should be happy. She was already under a lot of stress, and with all that has happened, the situation has only become more difficult." She sighed. "But it seems the worst is behind us."

Nora flashed a weary smile. "We can only hope."
As Ruby approached the Templar camp, it was to find quite a fuss. Some soldiers were packing, others were standing around looking notably lost, and still others were in a rough crowd around the middle of the camp. The guard androids saluted as Ruby entered, the soldiers paying her no mind as she approached the milling crowd, raised voices coming from within.

"I cannot simply abandon my duties to soothe your sore ego." Ironwood bellowed.

"My sore ego?" Glynda scoffed. "I don't recall being ambushed by my own soldier, with my equipment no less, and if I recall correctly it was you who lost the prisoner."

"Via unforeseeable circumstances." Ironwood countered. "We had no way of anticipating such an attack."

"You were hunting a vampire." Glynda jabbed. "It never occurred to you that Cinder could have enthralled a wayward scout?"

"I trust my soldiers to resist." Ironwood defended. "Evidently trust is not enough, and I will be instituting additional protocols for future vampire hunts. After a period of confinement and treatment, Specialist Zedong will be debriefed, and her experience will help prevent any repeat-"

"Typical, instead of taking responsibility, you shrug off the blame and say it won't happen again-" Glynda started.

"I am taking responsibility!" Ironwood yelled, pointing to the forest. "I will tear the forest to the ground if I have to, I will hunt down this Mercury-"

"You will not touch a tree, let alone the forest." Glynda cut him off. "The spriggans of this isle have remained peaceful for centuries. I will not have that peace broken by a boneheaded Templar with a chip on half his body!" Glynda hissed, and for the first time, Ruby saw a flicker of fury on the general's face, his right arm tensing, clenched fist shaking.

"Ruby, I'm so glad you're here!" Penny's voice came suddenly from her right.

"Fortunately you missed the boring windup." Blake drawled from her left. "Believe it or not we've only been here half an hour."

"What happened?" Ruby asked.

"Ironwood wants to stick around, Glynda wants him gone, drama ensued." Blake replied.
"Who's Mercury?" Ruby asked.

"Another accomplice." Blake answered. "Salem offered him as compensation, but for all we know he's escaped the island already. With all the chaos I'd bet he has."

"But General Ironwood is not concerned with likelihoods." Penny explained. "He is not pleased with this failed operation."

"And now he's digging his heels in trying to scramble back some lost respect." Blake added.

"What good is respect when it causes conflict?" Ruby asked.

"Conflict earns respect in the human world, or loses it." Blake shrugged. "Especially so for the Templars."

"The Order is flawed in the regard, righteous in belief, yet victim to the same petty human weaknesses." Penny murmured to herself, crestfallen. Blake smirked at the observation, but Ruby was left concerned.

"We can't let this continue, what if something happens?" Ruby fretted. Glynda and Ironwood were growing more aggravated by the minute.

"It has been some time since I witnessed Glynda demolish an upstart." Blake chuckled.

"Blake." Ruby groaned. "Penny?"

"I have an idea." Penny declared, not without some uncertainty. "But I may need your support." She lay a hand upon Ruby's shoulder, who covered it in her own, meeting her eyes and nodding. Ruby looked to Blake, who regarded the two with her usual bemusement, quirking her brow and gesturing for them to continue. Penny drew herself to her full height and stepped forward. "Excuse me sir."

The squabbling pair snapped to Penny, Glynda regarding her with vague annoyance, Ironwood schooling himself to address her coolly. "Yes Penny?" The general asked, far softer than expected after the heated words he had just exchanged.

"If I may, I have an idea, a compromise, that would benefit all of us." Penny spoke. "With Master Witch Glynda's approval of course."

The witch seemed curious, her stern expression softening. She too crooked her brow. "You may speak."

Penny paused, her shoulders heaving as if releasing a breath, addressing Ironwood first. "Allow me to stay in your stead, dedicated to protecting this island, assisting in its defense, and in the hunt for Mercury." She requested before turning to Glynda. "Master Witch, though my allegiance is no question, I am not a Templar. I do not share their views, nor their vows, nor do I condone all of their methods. I merely wish to protect the people in my own fashion, people I have come to care for, who have shown care for me that few others have rivalled...if you would allow it." She looked between the two leaders, awaiting judgement.

"This...is a sudden request Penny." Ironwood noted.

"I am aware of that sir." Penny nodded.

"I'm surprised you have grown so attached to this place in such a short time." Ironwood continued.
"In a way, I have Miss Glynda to thank for that." Penny smiled at the witch. "In disabling me, in allowing me to stay in Ruby's company, I found friendship, and understanding." She bowed to Glynda, who glanced at Ruby, receiving a smile.

"Should you stay, you will be given no authority, but for that which the people entrust you." Glynda advised. "Said privilege should be respected, not expected."

"I only desire to protect the innocent Miss Glynda." Penny insisted.

"The people of Patch self govern, gathering to discuss and vote on issues as a whole." Glynda explained. "Authority figures such as myself and Port are consulted only when our expertise is required. We, and by extension you, will hold sway under these specific circumstances. Otherwise, we exist to serve."

"I understand." Penny confirmed. "I vow never to overstep my bounds." She promised, laying a hand across her chest, where her heart would beat were it still present.

Glynda sighed, chewing her lip in consideration. "And what are your thoughts on this?" She addressed Ironwood.

The Templar wore an equally contemplative expression. "Is this truly what you wish?"

Penny nodded. "I had hoped I would find purpose among your ranks, however as time progressed, I never felt...comfortable. People fear us, people fear me, and I cannot escape that by your side. I don't think I belong here General, I apologize for wasting your time."

"Bringing you along was no waste of time Penny." Ironwood spoke softly. "You forget your father and I are friends. Without him I would not be standing here this day. I knew you might not belong with us. You are too kind hearted, lacking the temperament we drill into our recruits. I had hoped with experience you might find your own path, but I did not expect it would be so soon."

Penny felt a surge of relief at the General's approval, smiling up at him. "I like this island sir. The people are growing used to me, the children find joy in my presence. I would appreciate the opportunity to start my life anew here." She looked to Glynda once more. "Please, allow me this chance. I won't let you down."

Glynda met the automaton's pleading gaze as firmly as she could. She could not just deny her, it would be cruel to refuse outright, and accepting might rid her of Ironwood. But Penny was still an unknown, and a very unique case. Under any other circumstances she would fascinate Glynda, but for the time being she found herself uncertain, for a myriad of reasons. She looked to Blake, for once seemingly intrigued. The aspect nodded toward Ruby. "I take it you vouch for her Ruby?"

Ruby nodded, clasping her hands. "Penny is like me. We came into this world alone and afraid, learning to exist day by day...but until now neither of us have known anyone like ourselves. It's comforting to know we're not alone anymore. I'll miss her if she leaves...I don't want her to leave." She ended with a murmur.

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Glynda sighed, nodding. She looked to Ironwood expectantly. "Is this agreeable?"

"I..suppose so." Ironwood turned, noting the audience that had gathered, pulling himself to full height. "Resume your duties." He ordered, and the soldiers hurriedly dispersed. "Penny will require a recharge station. I will have the engineers dismantle one of our own, but it will need a secure area to protect it."
"It need not be large." Penny noted. "A bathroom, or a shed will suffice."

"Hmm, I have a location in mind." Glynda mumbled. "Will there be anything else?" She looked between Ironwood and Penny.

"Thank you." Penny smiled. "This means the world to me, from both of you."

"So long as you find what you seek." Ironwood returned the smile.

"So long as you behave." Glynda grumbled.

"I vow." Penny started.

"I know, I know." Glynda sighed, rubbing the bridge of her nose. "I need a drink."

Pyrrha arrived at Port's forge carrying a heavy backpack. Her armor had suffered considerable battle damage and was in need of repair. She had insisted the heavy load was not a problem when Ruby offered to help her, but now, as her leg ached, she increasingly regretted her stubbornness. Pyrrha was just days removed from serious injuries, yet she already tried to act as though she were in perfect health. The bandages still ringing her head and leg belied her self deception.

With the weather getting colder and colder, Port had moved his operation inside the building. Pyrrha entered to find it stuffy and hot, though an open window provided the occasional chilling breeze to balance things out. The blacksmith was hammering away on a sword and did not notice her. "Hello." Pyrrha greeted.

Port looked up from his work. "Good day Pyrrha!" He boomed. "It's wonderful to see you on your feet!" After one last strike, he put the blade aside, wiping off his hands as he moved to the shop's counter. "What can I do for you today?"

"My armor is in need of repairs." Pyrrha replied. She placed the backpack on the counter and started unpacking it. "One of my greaves was punctured, and the other has some dents that need to be smoothed." She laid the armor out. Port frowned at the neat hole in the right greave. "My shield also took some hits. The core is undamaged, but it'll need new bronze facing."

"I only wish I had been of assistance...I found myself sleeping off a rather hearty lunch that day." Port sighed, shaking his head. He grabbed a tool, running it along the rim of the shield. After completing the circuit, the bronze facing detached. It showed several partial punctures, each with silver and lead embedded in it. "You acted recklessly, charging a sniper like that...uphill no less!"

"I did what needed to be done." Pyrrha protested.

"You could have died." Port noted.

"When I chose to become a Huntress, I accepted that I might die protecting the innocent." Pyrrha countered. "I vowed to-"

"I should have made you promise not to throw your life away." Port cut her off.

"Would you have done any different?" Pyrrha challenged. "You always told stories of charging into battle against hopeless odds, of taking on missions that seemed suicidal."

Port frowned, slumping onto a stool behind the counter. "I fear my braggadocio bestowed the wrong lessons."
"What do you mean?" Pyrrha inquired.

"Do you know why I have a mustache?" Port asked.

"Because it's a symbol of manliness, of all that is good, virtuous and strong!" Pyrrha did her best impression of the old Huntsman. "And the ladies love it!"

Port suppressed a chuckle, and failed to hide his smile. "If only." He reached into his mouth, wincing. With a click, he pulled free the dentures that replaced most of his upper teeth. "It's a bit of vanity, yes, to cover up a horrible scar. I'd hate to scare children just by my appearance."

"I... had no idea." Pyrrha admitted.

"In my youth, I was as reckless and impetuous as my stories would imply, but my actions were not without consequence." Port explained. "Sure, decisive action and headlong charges usually carried the day for me, but not always." He slipped the false teeth back in, seating them with a click. "I was in Vale, far from any cities, hunting a group of bandits that had been preying on travelers. I found the brigands, three of them. After stalking them for a time, I saw my opportunity. They were enjoying a meal, a freshly killed deer, and not paying attention to their surroundings.

"I leapt from the shadows, shouting and swinging my axe. One of the bandits jumped up and fled, but the other two hastily grabbed their weapons. They were not nearly fast enough. I cut one down with my axe, and felled the other with my blunderbuss. I looked off in the direction the third had run, and saw to my surprise that he had stopped. He began drawing his bow, arrow at the ready. He was terrified, shaking, and I knew I had him. With a grin I rushed at him, expecting he would flee in terror rather than try to fight.

"I was wrong. He loosed his arrow, and though his hands were unsteady, it flew true, striking me in the face. He must have thought he killed me, because when I came to, he was gone. Only pure luck saved me, he was using the wrong type of arrowhead and it got jammed in the bone before it hit anything important. But it cost me my teeth, and my good looks." Port allowed himself a quick laugh and a fond smile. "It did teach me a valuable lesson though. Never assume that being stronger, fiercer, braver, better, will be enough. A coward with an arrow can fell the greatest hero just as easily as an Ursa Major. The same goes for an enthralled sniper."

"But if I hadn't stopped her-" Pyrrha started.

"I know, it was a difficult situation, but I hope you'll learn from it." Port nodded. "As a Huntress you are a shield and blade, protecting the innocent, slaying those who would do them harm. There are times when you must put your life in danger. But you will do no one any good by throwing your life away. Your weapons will not wield themselves. I can repair your shield and your greaves, that is simple. Replacing you is impossible."

"You're... you're right." Pyrrha relented. "I was a fool." She bowed her head.

"Chin up!" Port encouraged. "Look on the bright side. You're alive, you've learned a valuable lesson, and-"

"And I've got one hell of a story to tell." Pyrrha met Port's smile with one of her own.

"Exactly!" Port laughed.

"There is the matter of my scar though." Pyrrha noted. "I wouldn't want to scare children either."

"I could make you a helmet." Port suggested.
"No, too bulky, would restrict my senses." Pyrrha shook her head. "Perhaps...a circlet, like the one I wore when I first came here."

"Really?" Port quirked his brow. "I'm getting on in years, and my memory isn't what it used to be, but I believe you called it a 'vain and pointless symbol of a decadent culture.'"

"I did say that, didn't I?" Pyrrha grinned. "I was just a child back then. I've matured. Now I see it as a vain and pointless symbol of a decadent culture, but also a part of my Mistrali heritage."

"And it doesn't hurt to be vain every now and again." Port added. He gestured to the bandage wrapped around Pyrrha's head. "When you're healed up I'll take measurements."

"I'll draw up a design." Pyrrha suggested.

"Perfect." Port paused for a moment, thinking. "Are you by any chance heading to Penny's new home?"

"I am, why?" Pyrrha asked.

Port reached under the counter, picking up a crate and placing it before Pyrrha. "I completed the door handles she ordered. Apparently robotic hands aren't very good at gripping knobs."

Pyrrha and Port shared a chuckle at that. "I'll be sure to deliver those." Pyrrha agreed. "Oh, do you have a spare bearskin by any chance? Penny expressed a desire to have a rug."

"Of course, I have plenty!" Port headed into the back room, returning with a rolled up rug.

"What do I owe you for all this?" Pyrrha asked.

"Nothing, nothing, it's free of charge." Port refused payment. "Consider it compensation for your service to the people of Patch."

"You're going to end up out of business with that kind of generosity." Pyrrha warned.

"I only return the generosity that is shown me," Port smiled. Pyrrha picked up the crate and slid the rug under her arm. She winced as she put pressure on her injured leg. "Perhaps I should help you carry all this."

"No, no." Pyrrha shook her head. "I'm fine." She walked to the exit and found herself stymied by the closed door. "Oh...well...I suppose I could use a little help."

Port walked over, taking the rug from her and opening the door. "That's another important lesson. Never be afraid to ask for help."

Patch's two settlements embodies many things, but consistency was not one of them. Over the decades many different people had constructed various buildings using all manner of designs and techniques from all over Remnant. The later generations had built on, over and around the early buildings, resulting in a mish-mash of aesthetics that ultimately balanced out. It helped that importing materials was expensive and inconvenient, so most were sourced on the island. That meant that regardless of the design, everything ended up looking at least a little similar.

Among these buildings was a small cabin on the edge of town. No one remembered when it was built, let alone who had constructed it. It was obviously abandoned, though of sturdy construction, if rough around the edges. Somehow it had weathered decades of storms without being blown
down. Perhaps it was the craftsmanship, perhaps it was Patch's strong wood, or perhaps Glynda's wards had preserved it. Regardless, it stood battered but unbroken, a perfect fixer-upper, and Penny's new home.

Over the course of a few days the cabin was slowly repaired. A patched roof and new wood siding rendered it safe from the elements once more, shutters were replaced, and the interior cleaned and painted. The wood flooring was in surprisingly good shape, needing only a thorough cleaning, sanding and a new coat of lacquer. Then came furnishing, and the town showed its generosity and welcome with a wealth of donations. A simple bed, table and chairs, a cupboard and two chests of drawers, curtains, rugs and blankets. Offers of kitchen utensils and food were turned down graciously. Penny was never anything less than joyful as her new home, her first true home, came together.

All the while Glynda helped prepare the cabin for Penny's needs. The dismantled charge station was integrated into the bed. Penny need only lie down and plug a cable into her arm, and power would be drawn from solar crystals stored beneath. Ironwood had donated a solar panel to keep them charged, and the excess power would go to the new lighting fixtures. Penny did not require the lights, the dark did not bother her, but any late guests would appreciate them.

"And...a little flourish...we're done." Weiss mumbled, half to herself, as she finished painting an ivory cursive 'Penny' on a plaque beside the front door. Penny had bashfully expressed this little desire upon the door's restoration. Her excitement for her own domicile was infectious enough that even Weiss joined to indulge her, assisting in the interior decorating, helping to pick colors Penny would find comforting. She settled on a deep forest green to coat what little of the walls were not covered in some sort of hanging.

"Oh, it's wonderful!" Penny squealed, clapping her metallic hands. "It's perfect, thank you Weiss!"

"It was my pleasure Penny." Weiss preened. "Was that the last touch?"

Penny looked over her home, an odd assortment of new and old, a few planters hanging from the balcony roof, warm light emanating from within. She felt a flicker within her being, and a smile grew across her face. "I believe so."

"I still think it needs a proper hearth." Yang groused.

"Shall we perform a ribbon cutting?" Blake asked with a smirk, conjuring a tendril of dark and weaving it into a strip of fabric.

Penny giggled. "I appreciate the thought, but I do not have scissors." Weiss rolled her eyes, drawing Myrtenaster and offering it to the automaton. "Oh, oh I see. I have some of my own." Penny chirped. With a click, the plating of her left arm split open, and from it a dagger floated free, suspending midair for Penny to take, the plating clipping shut behind it. "Thank you for the offer Weiss."

Rolling her eyes again, Weiss sheathed her blade. Flanking the door, Glynda and Blake held the ribbon between them. Penny heaved the closest thing to a breath she could muster, and swung her dagger through the cloth, the silver infused steel slicing through it effortlessly. "Welcome home." Glynda greeted, the ribbon dissipating in her hand.

"Yeah!" Yang cheered. "House warming party!"

Penny giggled, bouncing in joy as she opened the door, rushing into the small domicile and taking it in once more. She had entered the cabin before of course, but had been staying in Glynda's living
room, saving the first night's inhabitation for the home's completion. She did not need to charge often, especially if she was not taxing herself. Her soul's natural energy greatly extended the period her automaton body could operate, and theoretically could sustain it entirely. But it would be unwise to rely upon it. A constant drain on her energy would have negative effects, of a similar sort to what mages faced.

"I remember when I first moved here." Glynda reminisced. "It took years before the house felt like a home."

"You mean when you released me?" Blake drawled.

Glynda scoffed. "Please, you were hardly leashed in the first place, padding over my notes, waving your tail in my face…"

"I wanted attention." Blake mock pouted.

Glynda rolled her eyes. "You always want attention."

"Your attention." Blake clarified.

"If I paid attention to you all the time, I'd never get anything done." Glynda huffed.

"Liar." Blake smirked.

Sighing, Glynda turned to Penny, who now sat upon her bed, running a hand across the mismatched blankets. "Penny, how do you feel?"

Penny looked up, a small smile on her face. "It's strange. I never really thought I'd be here." She admitted. "I'd dreamed of having something like this, a little home, all my own, surrounded by a paradise to explore...friends to explore it with...I...it's so sudden to confront that dream in reality a-and...I…" Her voice grew hoarse, a strange tone corrupting it. Her hand rose to her cheek, before clenching into a fist. She stood once more, making her way to Glynda. "Thank you for giving me this...for everything."

Penny bowed her head, hands clasped meekly before her. "I'm so happy! I've never felt this way before. It's so strong and powerful a-and I can barely express it!" She stepped forward, wrapping Glynda in a hug, a little firmer than the witch would have liked, but given the circumstances, she elected to endure and return the embrace. "Thank you so much, I won't let you down I promise!"

Penny's broken voice warbled into Glynda's chest.

Glynda stroked the automaton's hair, for all the good that probably did. "Don't thank me so much Penny. It was Ruby's word I placed my faith in."

"I know, but you've taken a risk in trusting me, and I appreciate that." Penny smiled, releasing Glynda. She frowned when she turned around. Weiss, Yang and Blake were present, but Ruby and Pyrrha were not.

Weiss looked out the window and groaned. "Oh, lovely..." She grimaced. Penny pulled aside the curtains of the main window, and smiled at the sight that met her. Ruby stood in the clearing her cabin faced, watching in wonder, as the first snow of winter fell from the sky, slowly blanketing the ground around her in scattered ivory.

"Hmm, that took longer than normal." Glynda observed.

"Rubes!" Yang called. "First snow?!"
Ruby jerked, spinning around, cloak flaring as she did. "It is! It's awesome!" She laughed, eyes bright with wonder.

Yang chuckled, turning to open the door. "I remember my first snow, hated the stuff." She gestured for the others to leave, Penny taking the lead, jogging past to join Ruby.

"I once thought I had my fill in Atlas, but Patch is far less...harsh." Weiss commented as she passed.

"The lack of dense forest has marred Atlas, and the pollution is corrupting what majesty it once held." Glynda followed, Blake tapping Yang's nose as she went, the fiery summon biting playfully at the digit.

Gathered on the deck, the group joined Pyrrha. She sat on its edge, resting her leg. "A part of me keeps worrying they'll catch a cold, but I don't think Penny is capable of one, let alone Ruby." Pyrrha laughed to herself, watching as Penny showed Ruby how to make a snowball. Penny threw hers at a nearby tree, much to Ruby's delight.

"Oh dear." Glynda laughed. "That spells trouble."

"Did...you just make a pun?" Weiss asked.

"You're hearing things." Glynda rolled her eyes. "Have you fed recently?"

"I haven't felt the need yet, and I heard you just fine!" Weiss protested.

"Of all the humans I expected to have a sense of humo-agh!" Yang suddenly recoiled at a hard, cold impact at the back of her head. She shuddered and spun around, revealing the melting remnants of a snowball evaporating in her hair. "Ruby!"

Ruby merely waved, holding another snowball in hand. "Yang, snowball fight!"

"I...ugh I'm gonna' get you!" Yang growled, jumping to the ground and scooping up some of the now heavily falling snow...attempting to at least. Her frustration caused her temperature to rise, and she melted the snow on contact. "Damnit R-aph!" Another snowball hit her in the face, much to the amusement of the others. "Rrggh come here you!" She roared, taking off in a sprint. Ruby laughed, gathering another snowball before fleeing, Penny giggling at the sight.

"That's my girl." Pyrrha admired with pride.

Glynda chuckled. "Goddess of Flame, brought to her knees by snow."

"If this is how she reacts to snow, how does she handle you Weiss?" Blake teased.

"Blake." Pyrrha roused.

"Thoroughly." Weiss answered casually.

"Weiss." Pyrrha groaned.

Blake grinned. "Oh? Do tell."

"Please, not in my company." Pyrrha requested.

Weiss smirked. "Or what, you'll get a little hot under the collar?"
"I expect better of you than teasing Weiss." Pyrrha chastised.

"What can I say-" Weiss started.

"Yang is rubbing off on you?" Blake finished with a smirk.

Weiss blushed. "That...is accurate."

"And on that note, I shall be returning to my patients." Pyrrha rose, easing weight onto her recovering leg.

"Don't forget to save Ruby before you leave." Glynda reminded.

Pyrrha looked to her summon, now wrestling about on the ground with Yang, melting the snow around them as they went. It was a fair stalemate, though for a moment Ruby sat atop Yang's back, holding her down. She stopped to wave at her mistress, grinning cheerfully.

Pyrrha smiled, waving back. "More than anything, I have faith Ruby can take care of herself."

Chapter End Notes

End Season 1

Thank you for following, TTW has been a joy to write, apart from the obligatory writers block and fatigue we always fall victim too, we broke new ground, tried new things, explored territory we've never trod upon before, like futa, because you all fucking loved a good futa scene.

Now I realise in the past I've stated we'll be moving onto Rose's Garden and Getting a Grip, but we've decided to have more of a break from the norm. We have been conceptualising a new fiction for quite some time, and recently elevated it to full planning stages, we have the entire first act planned, of three planned acts.

All as one continuous story, no seasonal breaks this time, this will be our next On Thin Ice.

We call it Sunrise. An experiment in evolving ships.

I want to have eight chapters prewritten before we begin posting, to allow for leeway, I'll admit I'm far more slack than Jws with my writing, but I'm going to double down, and hopefully within a week we can begin posting.

Until then, goodbye, and thank you for reading, we value your time, and crave your feedback, and hope to read from you all soon, and for many days to come.

<3
Chapter Summary

"But it tastes like piss!"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It did not take long for Penny to find a job. Raising children on Patch was a communal affair, as most parents were busy all day with their other responsibilities. There was a school to attend, but after its conclusion, there were still several hours during which the children needed to be monitored and occupied. The teachers would generally take turns watching the kids after hours, sometimes taking them on educational trips around town, or into the nearby meadows to play. Unfortunately, should the group come under attack from one of the creatures that roamed the island, their chaperone could do little more than act as a sacrifice and distraction to facilitate their escape.

Everyone on Patch had at least some vague self-defense training. Living among the world's dangers demanded it. But none could match Penny's combat prowess. Combined with her dedication to protecting the people of Patch, and the children's fascination with her, those skills made her the natural choice to be their after-school caretaker. For the first few days, the teachers took turns as they had, now monitoring Penny as much as the children, but they soon came to trust the automaton, noting her kind and gentle nature. Their trust was cemented when Penny dealt with a Beowolf that strayed dangerously close to the village as the children were playing near its edge. She was delighted - if the people of Patch could trust her with their children, they must truly have faith in her.

Penny's first solo outing with the children saw her chaperoning a trip to Port's forge. Learning about metalworking, be it for weapons and armor, or simply for everyday tools, was useful in a community that produced much of its own necessities. In addition, Port would not live forever. One day, someone, possibly one of the children present, would have to take over as the island's blacksmith. Most of the children could find something of interest at the forge. For some it was the completed weapons and armor that were on display all around the place, for others it was Port's possibly too graphic monster hunting stories, while still others marveled at the way the glowing metal bent and stretched as the master smith worked it.

"Whether you're cutting monsters or dinner, you want your blade to be as sharp as possible." Port opined, holding a still unfinished blade in the air, before returning it to the flames. "You obviously need a sharp blade to cut up the beasties, especially the ones with thick hides and scales. But for cooking you might think it's safer to have a blade that's less sharp. Wrong! A dull blade is more likely to slip, more likely to cut you instead of the food." He paused for a hearty laugh. "Now, you may think all my scars come from claws and teeth, but I almost lost this finger making lunch!" He held up his left hand, showing off the discolored scar that ran across his thumb.

"But that's your thumb." Bethany spoke up.

"So?" Port asked, genuinely curious to see where the child was leading.
"You said you cut your finger, but a thumb isn't a finger." Bethany explained. "It's a thumb. It's all fat and stubby, and turned to the side."

"Hmm…" Port rubbed his chin. "You make a good point. You kids are getting smarter all the time! I bet your parents are-"

"Someone help!" A voice cried from outside. The children rushed to the windows to look, Penny and Port close behind. "Help!" Gently moving the children aside, the pair pushed through the door and stepped out into the street to see a man leading a mule-drawn cart. "She's injured, she needs help!" The man gestured to the cart. Atop several crates, lie a figure wrapped in tattered cloth.

"What happened?" Port asked as the man brought his cart to a stop in front of the group. The children gathered around with a mix of concern and curiosity.

"I found her on the road." The man replied. "She was walking through the snow and collapsed in front of me. I put her on the cart and rushed here as quickly as possible."

"She needs medical attention." Penny declared, examining the unconscious woman. "Her body temperature is dangerously low." The cloth draped over her, first appearing to be an overcoat or shawl, looked more like a curtain under closer inspection. The woman's clothes were tattered and she was barefoot, the soles of her feet battered and bloody. "I will take her!" Penny picked up the comatose woman before turning to Port. "I place the children in your care. Protect them with your life."

"Gladly." Port responded with enthusiastic determination.

Faster than any human could, Penny raced toward the one place she knew the woman would receive the best care.

"Just get it over with." Nora grumbled. Glynda obliged, squeezing the medicine from a dropper and into the werewolf's eye. At first Nora had recoiled from the solution, even groaning in pain as the chemicals touched her injured eyes, but after days of treatment she now barely flinched.

Glynda quickly squeezed a few drops into Nora's other eye, then set the dropper aside. "There, all done." She tried to be kind and encouraging, but Nora was a difficult patient, and Glynda's patience was wearing thin, not that this was all Nora's fault. These were trying times.

Pyrrha arrived at the door bearing a tray with two drinks, one marked with an 'N', the other an 'R'. "The potions are ready." She announced, placing the tray on the table between the beds. Ren readily sat up and consumed his concoction, his expression barely changing as the bitter liquid hit his tongue.

"Do I have to drink it?" Nora sighed.

"Yes Nora, you have to drink it." Glynda insisted.

"But it tastes like piss!" Nora complained.

"I put honey in it to improve the taste." Pyrrha frowned.

"Honeyed piss is still piss." Nora huffed.

"If you don't drink it, you won't heal." Glynda noted. "If you want to spend the rest of your life in my spare bedroom-"
"Fine, I'll drink it." Nora relented. "But I wanna' go outside. It sucks being cooped up in here all the time." Pyrrha handed her the glass and she drank it as quickly as possible, making a show of contorting her face in displeasure. "There. Now can I go out?"

"Ren, are you feeling well enough to guide her?" Pyrrha asked.

"I am." Ren nodded, his voice still hoarse, but far stronger than it had been just days earlier. He was recovering rather well, though he still ran out of breath fairly quickly.

"Then let's go." Nora offered her arm for Ren to take. Her recovery was not going as smoothly. Sure, she was no longer totally blind, now able to see vague shapes and colors, but her eyes were still not healing nearly as quickly as Glynda had anticipated. Though the witch had to admit her expectations were not based on any solid information. No one had ever treated a werewolf for exposure to a Templar silver smoke grenade, at least as far as she knew. Likewise, Penny and Winter knew of no such cases. They were only ever used to incapacitate werewolves for immediate execution, so trying to reverse their effects was uncharted territory.

"Be careful, and no running." Glynda warned. "Next time you skin your knees, I'm not numbing them, and clothe yourself."

"Fine." Nora pouted. "Ren, help me get dressed."

There was a pounding knock on the door, followed by muffled shouting. "What was that?" Ruby called from the next room over, where she had been reading.

"I-" Glynda barely began when a loud slam and the sound of splintering wood filled the house. "For the love of..." She and Pyrrha rushed from the room, joining Ruby to run down the stairs.

"Glynda!" Penny shouted from the living room. "I am sorry but it's an emergency!" Glynda, Pyrrha and Ruby rushed into the room, followed by a smirking Blake, who seemed quite amused by the turn of events. Her grin disappeared when she caught sight of Penny, and the limp form she held.

"Gods, it's Dew." Pyrrha gasped. "What happened to her?"

"A merchant found her on the roadside." Penny explained. "She is suffering from severe hypothermia and malnutrition, as well as several physical injuries."

"Place her on the couch." Glynda instructed. With a flick of her wrist and a snap of her fingers, the fireplace roared to life. Penny gingerly laid Dew on the couch, and Glynda crouched by her side. "She's close to death. Blake, the emergency tonics..."

"Of course." Blake responded, heading for the basement.

"Ruby, can you heal her like you healed me?" Pyrrha asked.

"I can try." Ruby replied. She approached Dew's motionless form, holding out her hands and concentrating with everything she had. Nothing happened. "It's not working. I can't...it's hard to...I can't feel it."

"It's okay Ruby." Pyrrha soothed. Blake quickly returned with a trio of vials, two containing green liquid, the third red. Glynda carefully poured them into Dew's mouth, one by one. There was no apparent effect. "Is she going to be alright?"

Glynda took a deep breath and held her hand over Dew's chest. After a few seconds she smiled and stood. "Strange..."
"What?" Pyrrha asked.

"She's reacting more strongly than I had anticipated." Glynda explained. "I feel a power stirring within her, magical power."

"I've never known Dew to use magic." Pyrrha noted.

"Neither have I." Glynda nodded.

"So she will recover?" Penny asked.

"It appears so." Glynda confirmed.

"I am sorry about your door." Penny meekly apologized.

"It was very expensive." Glynda grumbled.

"You can fix it, effortlessly I might add." Blake smirked.

"That's not the point!" Glynda growled. "I'm tired of people blasting into my house and wrecking the place."

"Does this happen often?" Penny asked, tilting her head.

Pyrrha chuckled. "More often than you'd think."

Velvet went around the circle, lighting the candles that lined its edge. "It's a circle, right? Yeah, it has to be. I did the string line thingy. It only looks like an oval because you're at an angle." Womp snoozed in her basket nearby, not even knowing she was part of a conversation. Velvet continued lining up the objects the ritual required, arranging them in the circle as the spellbook instructed. She looked back and forth between the book and her setup, ensuring they perfectly matched.

Velvet had put in a lot of practice to prepare for this. Sure, it was all self-taught, and she had no solid way of knowing if she was getting it right, but it had to count for something, right? Her first attempt had not summoned the intended target, but at least she got Womp out of it. She had studied the materials Pyrrha had loaned her, checking everything over to find out exactly where she had gone wrong. Her pronunciation of one of the incantations must have been off. Pyrrha helpfully rewrote everything phonetically, so that should not be a problem again.

The candles and wall-mounted dust lamps lit the room with a flickering glow. Velvet found it eerie but appropriate. For her, practicing magic had always been a clandestine activity, and this nocturnal ritual was no different. Velvet took a deep breath and set the spellbook on the table beside her circle. She adjusted her reading glasses and looked over the instructions, practicing the arm movements the book prescribed. She had gone through those motions many times, but the next time it would be the real deal.

After taking a few short breaths to calm herself, Velvet began speaking the incantation. She moved her arms about in perfect time with the strange words. A pink glowing orb began to form in the circle, its light overpowering that of the surrounding candles. It was working! She did her best to avoid getting overly excited, to keep her speech and movements steady. Only perfection would result in success. The orb began to grow, energy arcing and crackling across its surface.

Disturbed by the growing noise and building energy, Womp awoke, startled by the magical orb as it pulsed. The rabbit leapt from its basket, jumping about in agitation. Velvet did her best to ignore
her pet's antics, continuing with the spell. The orb rose from the ground, stretching until it was nearly two meters tall and notably oblong. It was just as the spellbook had indicated, just a few more lines to go. Womp began running around the outside of the circle, seemingly matching Velvet's excitement.

Suddenly, the orb's color shifted notably red, the energy surrounding it ramping up in intensity and arcing outward, first striking the candles that lined the circle and turning them into spectacular torches. This was not how the book described it. Velvet had clearly made some mistake. She stopped her incantation but it was too late. With a rush of energy and a loud crash, the orb exploded, knocking Velvet off her feet and sending her sliding across the floor until she struck the wall behind her. The table she had been using just barely miss her, shattering against the wall beside her. The windows shattered as the blastwave continued outward, wrecking everything in its path.

Then all was calm and dark, the candles blown out by the blast, the dust lamps shattered. Velvet sat up and groaned, her body aching, seeming to burn from the inside out. She managed to push herself to her feet, staggering a few steps to open the door, admitting the light from the bright hallway. The room was scattered with debris, the destroyed remains of all it had contained. Where the circle had been, there was now only a scorch mark, matching one on the ceiling above it.

"Womp!" Velvet cried. She rushed to the animal's overturned basket, righting it to find...nothing.

"Womp?! Where are you?!

Glynda fell back upon the soft pelts covering her bed, the silky furs rubbing gently against her bare back. Her clothes had been hastily dissolved not moments before, as her bonded let her essence run rampant. The darkness never bothered Glynda, not when endless fluttering caressed her body and hungry teeth nipped her collar. The shock and stress of the day melted away beneath the gentlest of warmth.

It never ceased to overwhelm Glynda, the sheer intensity of a million fingers tracing every contour of her body, each with as much care and adoration as those golden eyes held, ever watching, ever burning, deep into her soul, into their soul. Until it stopped. Glynda opened her eyes in dazed confusion to find Blake staring at the door. Her body screamed. Her voice croaked. "What?" She asked, barely containing her annoyance.

"Velvet." Blake answered, the room's muffling charm weakened in a disorienting pitch, frantic thumping becoming evident.

"Ugh...let Pyrrha handle it." Glynda grumbled. "Why else do I keep her around."

"Something feels off." Blake leaned down, planting a kiss on Glynda's lips. It failed to quell the heat throbbing within. "Come now, It shouldn't take long."

"Nothing ever seems to take long, and then it balloons into nonsense." Glynda hissed, shooting to her feet. In a burst of dark essence the tendrils wrapped around her body to form her usual attire. "A witch's work is never done I suppose." She sighed, one last tendril writhing its way through her hair, forming the blonde strands into a perfect bun.

"You look enchanting my dear." Blake smirked, opening the door. "Now, tend to your flock."

Hitched sobs echoed through the hall as they approached the living room, where they were none too surprised to find Pyrrha and Ruby flanking the sobbing seamstress on the couch. "What happened?" Glynda inquired, halting in place as the girl shuddered and flinched inward. Pyrrha
looked up, exasperated. "Velvet." She tried again, firmer this time. The girl slowly looked up through frazzled bangs. "What happened?" She already knew of course. Velvet had meddled with magic in the past. Thankfully Womp had been the only tangible result. Pyrrha had promised to keep an eye on her experiments, but the girl lacked natural talent. Without proper education she should not have the ability to summon more than the odd sprite.

"I...killed Womp." Velvet croaked, dissolving into another round of sobs.

Glynda had to bite back an agonized groan. If it were just an injury she could heal it, use it as a lesson, but this was a far more personal issue, and it had finally found its climax. "What exactly did you do?"

"I-I was trying to summon, a-and something went wrong, and Womp jumped at me and it blew up, and I can't find her and I dunno' what to do!" Velvet rambled, clutching her head and curling inward again. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I know I fucked up. I'm not supposed to do stuff like this but I didn't wanna' hurt anything. I just...I just wanted to not be alone."

Glynda could not hold back the weary sigh at this. Loneliness was a terrible thing, a feeling she was all too familiar with. She could sympathize with Velvet, to a point. "Come now, we don't know for sure what happened until I can examine the environment." She held out her hand to Velvet, who blanched. "Ruby, Pyrrha, go back to sleep. I'll handle this."

"Uh...a-are we teleporting?" Velvet asked. "Because I've heard it's reall-huagh!"

Glynda grasped Velvet's shoulder and let the void tug them in. A moment later they stood in front of Velvet's store. Or rather, Glynda and Blake stood, as Velvet knelt on the ground, hunched over as her stomach threatened to expel its contents.

"I see you shattered the windows." Glynda observed, staring up at the empty shutters, swaying in the wind.

"Ugh...that's horrible." Velvet whimpered.

"Glynda, what happened here?" Port's boisterous voice came from nearby. She turned to find the former Huntsman striding forth, pajama clad, blunderbuss in hand. "Ms. Scarlatina, are you alright?"

"Peter, good evening." Glynda greeted, steadying Velvet as she staggered to her feet. "The girl will be fine. It's her meddling I must examine. I assume you've calmed the townspeople?"

"As best I could, though we still have an audience." Port gestured to the odd spectators loitering about the street.

Glynda turned to address the onlookers. "Continue with your nights. This was a flawed crystal malfunction. I take full responsibility."

"Is Velvet okay?" A woman called in question.

"I'm fine Sara, just a bit shaken." Velvet responded, surprisingly steady in her reply. "Sorry about the fuss." She added before pushing through the shop door.

Glynda left Port with a simple nod, following the seamstress into the back room. Thankfully it seemed the damage had been contained, as the rest of the store was in decent shape, apart from the windows. A kinetic blast then, typical of backfires and lapses in control. Hopefully nothing else unpleasant came of the failure. A flight of stairs led them to the second floor. They entered a small
kitchen, also relatively unscathed, but for a few baubles that had toppled over. Glynda righted a small gnome, an ugly thing, but Velvet's grandmother had enjoyed them, and the girl has suffered enough without losing more of her. Glynda understood the pain of lost family, and the urges that followed.

"I looked everywhere for her..." Velvet murmured as they entered the bedroom. "She couldn't have escaped, the windows are still barred and the door was shut. I just...looked everywhere..." She waved her hands weakly, sitting on the edge of her bed, staring at the remnants of the ritual before her. Blake sat beside her, slipping an arm around her shoulder in comfort.

The room was fairly ordinary, with a large bed covered in thick fur blankets, a dressing table at its foot, and a large armoire in the opposing corner, all thick, solid wood, carved simply, likely by one of Patch's craftsmen decades ago. The Scarlatina matriarch had been wealthy, sparing no expense in her retirement, and the tradesmen of the isle built their works to last. Sadly one of the table mirrors had shattered spectacularly, the remnants of another table splintered on the floor near the windows. The larger part of the room had been cleared, to make way for a simple, but admittedly competent summoning circle, now burned into the hardwood forever.

"The circle was sound." Glynda observed. "What chalk did you use?" She held out a hand in caution. Reisual magics lingered in the air like a foul odor. Even a defunct circle could still hold a connection and Glynda had not survived this long by throwing caution to the wind...all of the time.

"Uh...Menagerian, something about the salt content?" Velvet replied.

"Salt supplements the binding nature of a circle...candles?" Glynda nudged the puddled remains of some form of wax, purple in tint.

"Lavender, it soothes me." Velvet answered.

With a nod, the witch continued to examine the room's aura. "The incantation?"

"I have a book, but I was reading the phonetic translation, because of my accent..." Velvet explained.

"And where is it?" Glynda asked.

"I couldn't find it." Velvet huffed. "I think it got burned in the explosion."

"And the catalyst?" Glynda inquired.

"Some cherries." Velvet replied.

Glynda hummed, then sighed. The room's air was muddled, but no foreign elements were present. Just Velvet, Blake...and Womp. Yes, Womp was still there, in some form, either in spirit or residue. There seemed to be no notable organic matter, unless the animal had been incinerated beyond detection. The scorch marks on the ceiling seemed fairly well contained. Thank the gods Velvet had drawn a good circle.

"Velvet, I will give credit where credit is due." Glynda began, looking down into red-ringed eyes. "You followed the ritual as well as can be expected of an amateur. You used the correct materials, in the correct manner, and I assume you followed the correct order as specified in the manual, did you not?"

"Yeah?" Velvet nodded.
"Then there is nothing you could have possibly done to avoid this, and the fault lies with me."
Glynda sighed.

"Huh?" Velvet balked, jaw dropping.

Glynda resisted the urge to sigh once more as she sat opposite Blake. "Magic is very alluring Velvet, a seemingly infinite wealth of solved problems, all to be conjured with the right scrawling and specific words, but I learned quickly the difference between a passion for magic, and the hunger for power. You, Velvet, desire neither, which is why I allowed this little hobby of yours to persist."

"Pyrrha told you." Velvet murmured in observation.

"Of course she did." Glynda confirmed. "Pyrrha is my apprentice. She follows in my footsteps to protect and nurture the people of this island, my chosen home, and you are among them."

"Why didn't you stop me?" Velvet asked.

"Because I expected the most you could accomplish were a few singed eyebrows." Glynda shrugged. "You have no natural talent for magic. It does not call to you, you plead for it."

"Glynda." Blake chastised.

"I mean this as no insult Velvet." Glynda assured. "Magic is a complex matter. Some of us are favored by bloodline, others due to deeds, others still sheer dumb luck, or otherwise. And you are none of these things. You lead a normal, wholesome life, with no true demand for magic. You sought it out purely because you were afraid to ask for the help you needed." Glynda linked a hand through Velvet's, tilting her gaze upward with the other, until bloodshot brown eyes met her own. "Magic will not make you happy Velvet. What you need is wholesome companionship."

"There is none for me here." Velvet whispered. "They don't...care...for the things I do. They see me for what I do, for what I offer." She bowed her head once more. "At least this way I'd know what they wanted."

"What you sought to summon won't desire you for more Velvet." Glynda noted.

"They might, it's happened." Velvet protested.

"Stranger things have, but do you really want this to be your solution?" Glynda pressed. "We won't begrudge you leaving for greener pastures. There is more to this world than Patch."

"The world took everything from me." Velvet shuddered. "I don't want it. I don't wanna' go away. I just wanna' stay here until it's my time. Then I can join Womp...my sisters...mama and papa…" She choked a sob. "And grandmama."

Velvet lost herself to grief, leaning her head against Glynda's shoulder as she hitched and sobbed. Glynda let go to draw her into a firmer embrace. As desperate arms wrapped around her waist, Glynda had to bite down on her own emotions. They were far too familiar, far too bitter. Family, a horrific loss…especially for one so sensitive as Velvet. Yet the girl had grown so strong since her arrival.

Glynda should have acted sooner, on several accounts. "Prepare the spare room." Glynda instructed Blake. "We'll be along soon."

With a nod, Blake dematerialized, leaving Glynda alone with the still grieving girl. Old wounds
may heal, but their scars never truly faded. Glynda could empathize, she carried many of her own, but none so harsh as Velvet's. She had been so young, so fragile, so small in her arms.

They sat there for an hour, until Velvet's gentle hitching gave way to a calm slumber. Glynda carried her home.

Chapter End Notes

This story will be continued when we start our Patreon. We was planning to do so on the first of January, but due to unforeseen circumstances we'll be delaying it until February. Until then, enjoy this chapter. Even when we start our Patreon, this story will be posted here, though one week later than for members. Thank you for your patience and support.
It's funny Yang thought. The last time she had held a vampire, it was screaming in rage, engulfed in a fiery essence as she wiped the last of her coven from the face of Remnant. Now all she wanted to do was take a vampire's pain away, as Weiss struggled and whimpered in her slumber.

Weiss' dreams had set in as she healed, first merely irritating her slumber. A week later had seen them affecting her physically. She cried out, growled and thrashed in her sleep, at times angry, others anguish. Yang could not peer into Weiss' mind, and she refused to discuss the visions. Petty nightmares that will never come to pass as the vampire put it. It did little to ease Yang's worry. Perhaps if Winter were present, she would be able to coax it out of her sister. Unfortunately, the former Templar had temporarily retreated to her mountain home, packing for a longer stay.

Once Weiss awoke, and squeezed Yang so hard she strained to keep her essence intact, she could do nothing more than hold her, blazing hot as she dared, whispering soothing words in her ear, running calming fingers through her hair. Tonight was worse. Weiss was fighting, clawing suddenly and sporadically, frustrated and anguish. Yang latched onto her back, nuzzled into the frazzled white locks as she weathered the storm. But the struggling ceased. Was this the calm?

"Weiss?" Yang whispered. The reaction was a shuddering, alien growl. It chilled Yang, to hear such an animalistic sound from her lover. And it shocked her to suddenly be shrugged off, the vampire growling and shaking as she staggered to her feet, hunched over. "Weiss, Snowball?"

Weiss ignored Yang, stamping forward, almost tearing the door off its hinges as she left the room. Yang scrambled after her, finding Weiss standing by the fire, the dull embers barely lighting the nearby table. Weiss' breathing grew more labored, her clenched fists trembling. Yang took a step forward, and Weiss struck, the table collapsing beneath her fist as though it were made of cardboard. Yang froze as Weiss began beating the broken remnants, angry, desperate growls punctuating every impact, until she finally halted, panting, hitching, clutching her head.

"Snowball?" Yang tried again.

Weiss stiffened, tilting her head to look up at the aspect. "Yang?" She croaked, voice weak, strained with emotion.

"I'm here Weiss." Yang assured, closing the distance and wrapping her in a warm embrace.

Weiss curled into her lover's chest, oddly fragile as she shook. "I'm sorry." She whispered between sobs.

"It's okay, I'm here, you're here, we're safe." Yang soothed, once again threading fingers through the vampire's hair. "I love you."

Weiss shuddered, clutching at the arms around her. "She turned you to ash." She admitted. "I-I
"It was just a dream Weiss." Yang rationalized, planting a kiss on Weiss' hair. "I'm here, I'm alive, and I will never leave your side. Not even death herself can change that." Whether the words had their intended effect or not, Yang could not tell. The former human continued to hitch and whimper into her chest, until finally she seemed to calm, breathing steadily into her skin.

"I don't want to go back to sleep." Weiss said at last. "Can you...tell me something...a story from your past?"

Yang smiled, chuckling in relief. "Sure...how about..." Yang searched for the right tale, something happy, fun, anything to distract from the stress and pain of the night. "...the time I was accidentally summoned by a little girl."

"By accident?" Weiss balked.

"Yeah!" Yang confirmed. "I was as surprised as she was...I even forgot to be all scary."

Weiss' laugh was the sweetest thing Yang had ever heard, especially now. She silently vowed to coax it free every day, until they both ceased to be.

Velvet awoke to a strange but familiar environment. Pitch black, yet she felt no pain, the blankets were soft around her, and the scent reminded her of home - jasmine tea with a hint of lemon. A flash of gold drew her gaze leftward, to two glowing eyes floating in the dark. "Blake?" She whispered. The familiarity made sense now. This breed of dark was far more pervasive than any mortal happening. It settled across the room like a blanket, thick and tangible.

"Good morning Velvet." Came Blake's smooth response. The click of china proceeded the eyes closing the distance, the back of a cool hand pressing against Velvet's forehead. "You don't seem to be running a fever."

"I'm not here because I'm sick Blake." Velvet could not resist smiling. The gentle chuckle from above did not help.

"Not this time, thankfully." Blake trailed her hand down Velvet's cheek, tapping her playfully. "Yet you are ailing."

Velvet sighed, grasping one of the many nearby pillows and holding it against her face, much to the shadow aspect's continued amusement. Blake had been a part of Velvet's life since her arrival as a scared little girl, lost and confused, clutching her grandmother's hand and flinching at every sound and movement. Glynda had paid a visit. The Good Witch of Patch as her grandmother had called the woman. All Velvet heard was witch, and her mind was sent amok. Tall, regal and intimidating, teeth gleaming in the sunlight, surely the witch wanted to cast a spell on her!

"I messed up." Velvet frowned.

Velvet remembered hiding in her room, clutching her doll and cowering in the corner. She could hear the muffled voices of the witch and her loving grandmother. How could she invite her doom into their home?! Then came a soft meow, small but expectant. She did not think to question the sudden appearance of a black cat, let alone one that seemed to absorb the very light around it. It was pretty, gleaming golden eyes and a loud purr that filled the room. It soothed her beating heart, and brought the first hint of true comfort she had experienced since that horrible night.

"You did." Blake agreed, as blunt as ever. "As was natural."
"I just...wanted what you have." Velvet explained.

"What I have is not for mortals to covet Velvet." Blake scolded. "What you want is a family."

"Can you blame me?" Velvet asked.

"Not at all." Blake's voice grew louder, her presence weighing down the mattress beside her. "But there is one question I must ask."

Velvet sighed deeply into the pillow, the faint ache of guilt tugging at her heart, as if she were being scolded, and not toyed with by a malicious spirit. "I'm not goin' anywhere."

"Oh, I'm aware." Blake smirked. "You disliked leaving this bed the last time you stayed."

"It's the same bed?" Velvet inquired.

"Of course it is." Blake confirmed. "We only use this room for those recovering from serious sickness, like tuberculosis." Velvet whipped off the pillow to glare at the golden eyes, smaller now, and closer. "Don't worry, we clean very thoroughly."

"This is punishment." Velvet grumbled.

"If we wanted to punish you, we have far more entertaining methods." Blake chuckled. "No, what we want more than anything is to help you recover, and the first step is asking, why did you not come to us first?"

"Because you have better things to worry about than me being lonely." Velvet replied.

"And what makes you believe that?" Blake asked.

"Because she's Glynda!" Velvet blurted. "Everyone on the island comes to her for actual important stuff. Being sad isn't a sickness, it isn't a disease or a broken bone, I'm just…"

"Under Glynda's care, like everyone else." Blake noted.

"She can't cure me." Velvet insisted.

"If Glynda has taught me anything, it's that anything can be cured, in a manner of speaking." Blake countered.

"My family isn't coming back." Velvet lamented.

"Not all family is bound by birth." Blake declared. "Your friends remain, family in all but blood."

There it was, the shame. Blake could shame the pants off an Ursa, then strangle it with them. Thankfully Velvet's pants remained on, containing and magnifying the shame. Of course she loved her friends, of course she considered them family, but they were all so busy. Weiss was a Huntress, Pyrrha juggled that alongside her witch training, Blake was Glynda's devoted life partner, and Glynda herself? "I don't want to be a burden."

Blake laughed. "No one does Velvet. Weiss died, and her primary concern was getting back on her feet and out of everyone's hair. Pyrrha was shot - twice - and her only concern was consoling Ruby. It drives Glynda mad with grief that these children are placed in her care and hurting, and she cannot do more than soothe their pain. At least she can rest in the knowledge that Weiss has Yang by her side, and Pyrrha Ruby. But you? You suffer alone in silence, and Glynda is afraid to overstep her bounds, lest she drive you away."
"How could she ever drive me away?" Velvet balked. "She saved my life. She protects my home. She makes up one fifth of my yearly earnings in commissions alone."

"And if Glynda attempted to supplant your grandmother?" Blake questioned.

Velvet winced at the pang of grief that ran through her heart, and wrinkled her nose at the implication. "She wouldn't do that."

"Wouldn't she?" Blake insisted.

"No!" Velvet exclaimed.

"Then you'll understand her fear." Blake nodded. "She will never be your grandmother, but she may very well fill that role in your life."

Velvet mulled the words over in her head. Her relationship with Glynda had never been particularly...close. But there was no denying it, Glynda was a constant in her life. She had been one of the first people she met upon her arrival to Patch. That meeting had been surprisingly ordinary, random black cat aside. Kind greetings, a medical check, a lollipop that tasted like heaven...she just seemed normal, did not cast any spells, did not ask anything weird. She was just...nice.

Later, a serious case of pneumonia had left Velvet bedridden for several weeks, the last few of which had been spent in this very room. Weak, scared, separated from her only remaining family, the only thing that had kept Velvet together was Glynda's gentle care. She saw her first magic in those days, when Blake transformed into human form for the first time in her sight. The stories that flowed between them, the adventures Glynda shared with her familiar, and still more before, had healed her just as much as the medicine.

As Velvet had grown, Glynda remained, ageless and wise. As she learned to ply her grandmother's trade, Glynda had given her praise and challenged her to improve. When her grandmother had fallen ill, Glynda fought to save her, but when age denied the cure, she made her final days pain free. As Velvet's grandmother passed, Glynda was there to hold her.

Velvet fought the lump in her throat as she pushed herself upright, taking a deep and steadying breath to keep the emotions at bay. "Glynda has been good to me Blake, you both have. But I can't ask you to fill my home."

"It isn't me you have to ask, and you should know Glynda won't deny a reasonable request." Blake advised. "In fact, I believe she is going quite overboard for you."

Velvet tilted her head in confusion. "Huh?"

Blake dematerialized, unhelpfully leaving Velvet alone. Not that she did not know her way around, but being left on a cliffhanger always bothered Velvet. It was one of the reasons she never got into books - too many cheap tricks and predictable plotlines, waxing quality as time and ideas went on too far. No, she much preferred her own work. She could spend hours sewing a single piece without a single bother, only the chimes of her clock to tell her time had passed.

Pushing open the door, Velvet was immediately startled by a weight colliding with it, followed by a familiar ooph. "Oh crap, sorry...Pyrrha." Velvet gasped, stepping away to close the door.

Pyrrha stood rubbing her forehead, quite rosy in the face. "Oh no, it's quite alright, I wasn't looking!" Pyrrha rambled. "How are you feeling?"
"Pretty good actually." Velvet replied. "You okay?"

"I'm fine!" Pyrrha exclaimed. "Perfectly, just...I've got to go into town." She deflected, stepping past. "Glynda is in the kitchen. Ruby, I'm going into town if you'd like to come!" She called, rushing on down the hall, leaving Velvet a little shell shocked. She had never seen Pyrrha quite so flustered before.

"Coming!" Came Ruby's cheery reply, followed by the tapping of light footsteps. By the time Velvet reached the kitchen, the room was empty, apart from the Good Witch herself.

"Velvet." Glynda greeted. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yeah, pretty good." Velvet nodded. "I uh...don't remember us coming back here."

"Well I wasn't going to leave you in that drafty house." Glynda explained. "I'll repair it later. Muffins are on the table, I assume you remember your way around my kitchen."

"It doesn't seem to have changed much...is that a new stove?" Velvet asked.

"It is, its predecessor was the victim of an unfortunate brewing miscalculation." Glynda confirmed.

"It must have been a hell of a miscalculation." Velvet noted.

"It was certainly memorable, but even I make mistakes." Glynda turned, holding a mug of coffee to her lips, taking a measured sip. "I just make sure they're contained."

With a crook of her lips, Glynda instantly put Velvet at ease. She always had a way of doing that. When she was young it was candy. As she grew it was simple interest in her education. Now merely the reminder that Glynda was human seemed enough. She had always expressed a distaste at the reverence people held for her. No matter her power, no matter her deeds, Glynda never wanted to place herself above humanity. She put her stockings on one leg at a time and used natural makeup, rather than transfiguring her skin to appear as such. It seemed her ageless appearance was her only unnatural aspect, and Glynda argued that nature itself would disagree...whatever that meant.

"Blake said you had something planned." Velvet brought up, lifting the plaid cloth cover on the kitchen table. The muffins within still smelled freshly baked, courtesy of the temporal spell placed upon their shelter. Magic was truly wondrous. "Then she buggered off."

"Of course she did." Glynda laughed. "Yes, I have made plans. Depending on you they may or may not come to pass." She took another sip from her cup. "What you were attempting to summon, is this truly the path you wish to take?"

"I know it wouldn't have been perfect, but I'd know they were there." Velvet nodded. "Even if it was just because they got something from it."

"What you're asking for is not a healthy relationship." Glynda warned.

"I know, Glynda, I know...but it'd be nice to wake up to someone warm holding me, someone I can talk to...who knows...maybe we could even be friends." Velvet continued.

Glynda sighed, smile tight upon her lips. She stepped forward, pulling a chair free from the table, taking a seat before Velvet. "I know the feeling, to be alone in the world, despite the friends around you...I told you how Blake and I came to be." Velvet nodded, taking a bite from her muffin - blueberry, her favorite. "You must remember, Blake was a unique case, indebted. Out of gratitude,
our relationship was born naturally."

"I'm not expecting anything more than a companion, just company." Velvet explained.

"And if this company outstays its welcome?" Glynda pressed.

"I...hope it won't come to that." Velvet answered.

Glynda heaved a heavy sigh. "Very well them. Finish your breakfast, I will finish the preparations."

"Finish?" Velvet asked.

"I hardly expected to dissuade you Velvet." Glynda noted. "One way or another, I would find a way to help you, as I always have and always will."

Glynda stood, cup in hand, and began to leave, only for Velvet to reach out for her hand, halting her in place. "Glynda..." Velvet warbled. The Good Witch turned to properly face her, only to be wrapped in an embrace. "Thank you, for everything."

Glynda huffed, free arm returning the hug. "Always Velvet, always."

Upon arriving at his workshop, Pyrrha and Ruby found Port reclining behind the counter, casually polishing a sword. Seeing he had visitors, the blacksmith sat up, putting the sword and his tools on a shelf behind him. "Welcome!" He bellowed. "What brings the two of you to my forge this fine day?"

"We were just running some errands." Pyrrha replied. "And Ruby has something for you."

"Oh?" Port leaned forward, the usually narrow slits of his eyes widening a bit.

Ruby dug around in her satchel for a moment, pulling a crimson cloth from within. "I was learning how to knit, and I made you this scarf!" She cheered, holding it up.

"Hmm, I'd better not touch it with these dirty paws..." Port noted, showing his blackened hands. "I love the color!"

Ruby placed the scarf on a clean part of the counter, unfolding it to reveal several figures. "I learned to crochet too, so I crocheted you fighting a pack of Grimm on it."

"Haha!" Port howled. "Excellent! Perfect! This is exquisite! How long have you been practicing?"

"I started yesterday." Ruby answered. "I learned how to sew and all about astronomy too!"

"All in one day?" Port was taken aback. "Positively remarkable!" He paused for a minute, rubbing his chin, leaving a smear of polish on his skin. "Wait, astronomy?"

"I finished making scarves for everyone and it still wasn't bedtime, so I read a big book about it." Ruby explained. "The cover was really pretty."

"You're such an enthusiastic learner!" Port proclaimed. "You remind me of my son. He sucked up knowledge like a sponge!"

"I didn't know you had a son." Pyrrha interjected.
"Oh, I suppose I don't talk about the boy much." Port admitted. "And boy probably isn't the right word, Timoth is a grown man now...a werewolf actually, just like his mother."

"You had a child with a werewolf?" Pyrrha asked.

"We're still technically married as far as I know, though she prefers calling me her mate as opposed to husband." Port confirmed. "Unfortunately the werewolf life is too taxing for a mere mortal human of my age. Too much migrating. Delilah understands, though she always wanted me to join her in lycanthropy."

"Does your family ever visit?" Ruby asked.

"Oh, no, though I used to visit them before my knees gave out." Port shook his head. "Delilah is far too busy leading the pack to waste her time running off to see an old man, and Timoth is in the prime of his life! They do write on occasion. The pack is in northern Vale, but Timoth was exploring Vacuo with his mate. In his last letter he promised to visit soon. I can't wait to meet his Maya. They're not far from the age when they'll want to settle down and start a family of their own."

"Why didn't you ever mention them before?" Pyrrha inquired.

"I suppose I didn't think anyone would want to hear an old man's ramblings about his family." Port shrugged. "Besides, are tales of my adventures not more...exciting?"

"More exciting, yes." Pyrrha allowed. "But I'd love to hear about your family. They sound wonderful."

"Funny, I'd like to hear more about your family as well." Port suggested. "How are your mother and father faring? Is your brother well?"

"I...haven't heard from them in some time...years even." Pyrrha admitted. "They were not happy with my decision to train as a witch."

"Such a shame, parents should always support their children's life choices." Port declared. "Unless they choose to become a brigand or something like that, obviously. I'm sorry for bringing-"

"It's quite alright." Pyrrha waved away his apology. "I've got a new family here, and you're a part of it."

"Am I part of your family too?" Ruby asked.

"Of course." Pyrrha replied, at which Ruby beamed. "And it's getting larger all the time it seems."

"Yes...sorry to be a downer, but might I inquire about Miss Gayl?" Port asked tentatively. "I understand you and Glynda have been taking care of her."

"We expect her to make a full recovery, and sooner than would normally be expected." Pyrrha informed.

"Splendid, splendid, and how are the wolves in your care?" Port inquired.

"Improving, though Nora's eyesight is improving more slowly than we'd hoped; we are, in a way, flying blind here." Pyrrha sighed. "Ren is...he was...performing quite well." She cleared her throat, a sudden flush coloring her features.
"Mostly good news then." Port smiled reassuringly. "It must be difficult to take care of so many unruly patients."

"I'm actually enjoying it." Pyrrha corrected. "It can be trying at times, but very rewarding. Though I am very glad I didn't have to add Velvet to the list of the wounded."

"I take it her mystical dabbling took a rather dangerous turn?" Port suggested.

"Unfortunately...Womp didn't survive." Pyrrha grimaced.

"Tragic, the poor creature." Port slumped. "Dear Velvet must be crushed."

"She is, but Glynda has something planned to help with that." Pyrrha noted. "I'm sure whatever it is will be more successful than Velvet's efforts."

"Better to leave magic in the hands of the professionals," Port agreed. "Do offer my condolences."

"I will." Pyrrha responded. "We'll let you get back to work. Have a wonderful day."

"Bye Mr. Port!" Ruby cheered.

"Oh, one moment!" Port called as Pyrrha and Ruby turned to leave. "It almost slipped my mind. Old age is truly a blessing." He dug around in a nearby drawer, retrieving a white box, now stained with the polish from his hands. "Your circlet is ready." He opened the lid to reveal a bronze circlet, inlaid with gold. Its curvaceous lines were reminiscent of the decorations adorning the edges of Pyrrha's armor.

"Wonderful...this is exactly what I was hoping for." Pyrrha declared as she lifted the circlet. She slipped it over her hair, sliding it into place over the scar on her temple. "How does it look?"

"It's really pretty!" Ruby chirped.

"You look beautiful my dear, like royalty!" Port proclaimed.

"Oh, you're just saying that." Pyrrha blushed. "But thank you, perhaps now people will stop asking about the scar. How much do I owe you?"

"Not a thing my dear," Port replied. "Consider it an early Solstice gift."

"Thank you Peter." Pyrrha bowed.

"Seeing you smile is all the thanks I need." Port demurred. "Now go have fun with your girlfriend." Ruby tilted her head, looking to Pyrrha. "Girlfriend?"
Chapter Summary

"Oh look Melanie, it's another orgy."

On the way to bringing Penny the scarf Ruby had made for her, the summon had asked Pyrrha what Port meant when he called her Pyrrha's girlfriend. A stumbling explanation followed, along with the note that the old man was mistaken, as his meaning did not accurately reflect their relationship. Pyrrha was greatly relieved when Ruby accepted the rambling definition without further question.

Penny had been thrilled by the gift, hugging both Ruby and Pyrrha a little too tightly. One day she would get a feel for her strength...hopefully. A quick visit to the apothecary to pick up a few simple ingredients was next, then the pair were on their way to Weiss' home to deliver another scarf.

"What's Solstice?" Ruby asked as they walked side by side along the cobblestone path that led to Glynda's house.

"It's a yearly event, and an ancient holiday." Pyrrha replied. "The winter solstice marks the shortest day of the year. It was originally celebrated by sun worshipers, praying for the return of the holy orb after its time of rest, but it has come to be connected with many meanings for different peoples. Mostly it's just a time to be with loved ones, during which gifts are typically given and received."

"Oh, okay." Ruby nodded. "And what's the Solstice Festival?"

"It's Patch's largest yearly gathering." Pyrrha explained. "Merchants and craftsmen from all over the island, and even a few from the mainland, set up temporary shops in the town square. Their products are often discounted, and usually they even give some away. There's food and drinks and games too. At sunset there's a big party, and a fireworks display after dark...as long as it isn't too cold. Then the next day, after everything is cleaned up and the stalls have been taken down, there's a big town meeting."

"What happens at the meeting?" Ruby inquired.

"Mostly people stand up and thank those that helped them over the course of the year." Pyrrha answered. "It's mostly a way to publicly acknowledge all the nice things that happened, and the good people responsible for them. It's also a good time to make important announcements, since the whole town is there."

"I'm gonna' have to thank a lotta' people." Ruby mused.

"I think a many will be thanking you." Pyrrha noted. "Even if indirectly, you've done a lot of good here."

"I bet you and Glynda get lots of praise." Ruby guessed.
"We do, though not as much as you'd expect." Pyrrha allowed.

"Aw, why?" Ruby asked.

"As witches...we mostly work in the background, if we can help it at least." Pyrrha explained. "And some people are still a little uncomfortable with magic, and that makes them uncomfortable with us."

"That's a little sad, but I guess it makes sense." Ruby commented. "What about Weiss? Do many people thank her?"

"Hah." Pyrrha could not stifle a laugh. "You'd think she was the most popular person on the island. Who knows, maybe she is, even if she does usually keep to herself."

"Would it still be that way if they knew she was a vampire?" Ruby inquired.

"I..." Pyrrha paused, mulling the question over for a moment. "I really don't know. The townsfolk aren't always the most accepting of the supernatural, and vampires are feared by most."

"But if she helps them so much, why would it matter what she is?" Ruby pressed. "She's still the same person."

"I know, but not everyone agrees with us." Pyrrha sighed. "To most, vampires are monsters, just like the Grimm. They're afraid, and when people are afraid...fear does terrible things to our minds."

The embarrassment from earlier in the day was gone, now Pyrrha was worried. Weiss' vampirism was secret for now, but it could not remain so forever. When word got out...Pyrrha just hoped things would not get ugly.

It had been quite some time since Velvet had last stepped foot in Glynda's laboratory, and like the witch herself, little had changed. It still held the same burnt chemical smell, masked by exotic scents and hints of lemon, remnants of the occupant's favorite tea. The same tables were scattered with the same books, scrolls and papers, the same meticulously categorized ingredient shelves lined the walls, and the same sense of vertigo halted Velvet's movements as she entered, indicative of the reality altering magic Glynda employed. That magic was used to change the size of the room to whatever domain the witch required, now it was about double the length of the physical area that existed beyond the bounds of the spell.

"Trips to the basement are rarely so educational." Glynda began, picking up a length of chalk. "Do try to pay attention, this will be a tad more complex than your own effort."

"Yes ma'am." Velvet nodded, taking a nearby seat and watching as the witch began her work.

Glynda was meticulous in setting up the ritual. Velvet watched in awe as the master witch made the circles and laid out the offerings. Her attention to detail had been nearly obsessive, but Glynda managed to match that perfection effortlessly. The basement floor was marked with three summoning circles, each roughly two meters in diameter, lined with specially made chalk. They were ringed with candles and contained fresh rose petals and a small vial containing a white liquid Glynda called "Lover's Essence." Velvet knew what it really meant.

The witch chalked lines to a fourth circle and instructed Velvet to stand at its center. "Why am I in a circle?" The seamstress asked, confused.

"It will direct the summons' attention and make binding simpler once you've made your choice."
Glynda explained. "And it will protect you should one of the summons attempt anything unsavory."

"Oh that's...good." Velvet managed, suddenly very wary of her limbs' positions within her circle. "What was that about binding?"

"Summons can be unpredictable and potentially dangerous." Glynda noted. "Binding one to you is another safety measure."

"So how is this going to work?" Velvet inquired.

"Relax." Glynda instructed, laying a gentle hand upon her shoulder. "All will become clear as the ritual unfolds."

Velvet was less than encouraged by that answer, but she could understand Glynda's reluctance to tell her more than was necessary. She had done enough damage with her dabbling in magic, and more knowledge would only encourage further meddling with forces she could not control.

Glynda regarded the circles with a scrutinizing eye, mumbling beneath her breath, before walking over to a refrigeration unit, pulling it open. "A common misconception is that catalysts should appeal to the summoner. In truth all it does is influence the...aesthetic. A lemon will not bring forth a sour companion, a cherry will not bring forth something sweet." She pulled forth a plate of ice cream, placing it within the first circle. "Aspects are a strange occurrence. They are born of elements, but identify as specifics as time goes on. Those drawn to humanity are among the most varied. Luck, time, lust, dreams...they are more akin to humans than they may ever admit, yet they are also very far." Glynda picked up a jar of red and white boiled candy from one of her shelves, dropping a few pieces in the middle circle. "Do remember this. They will understand you, but they may at times be vexing to you. It is during these times you must be clear. Do not allow them to mislead you." Velvet nodded in affirmation as Glynda replaced the jar. She picked up another, containing some manner of brown beans - coffee or cocoa - to sprinkle in the final circle. "Do you feel you are ready?"

"Yes." Velvet nodded. She was as ready as she would ever be. "I am."

Glynda cleared her throat and turned her focus to the summoning circles. She began speaking in a tongue Velvet did not understand, though it was similar to the one used in her own attempts. As the witch spoke, spreading her arms wide, tall oval-shaped portals formed inside the circles. The offerings were absorbed into them, and they tinted pink, red and gold respectively. The flames topping the candles burned with increasing brightness, rapidly consuming the wax below. As Glynda spoke the final few syllables of the incantation, a figure appeared from each of the portals - two in the case of the center, red one. With a final blinding flare, the portals disappeared and the candles faded to their original intensity. The summoning was complete.

"Oh look Melanie, it's another orgy." Came an alien voice. Velvet blinked, her eyes adjusting to the now dim light, the scene before her becoming visible.

The leftmost circle contained a rather short young woman, seemingly in her late teens, clad in a loose white top and black cincher. She radiated smugness, smirking as she regarded Velvet through mismatched eyes, pink and brown, and white...they changed with each blink. Her long and flowing hair remained a consistent split, half pink and half brown. The middle circle contained twins, identical in all but the color of their attire. They shared the same black hair that shimmered in the candlelight, but their dresses gleamed an almost ethereal red and white, one color for each. Their green eyes gazed at the scene, seemingly bored by the presentation.
The third...was a surprising and intimidating departure. Taller than the others by a notable margin, she wore no clothes to speak of. Instead her pale skin showed from the waist up. Her legs from the knee down seemed to resemble some kind of...bone-like material, shaped in a way that resembled heeled shoes. Her clawed hands and forearms were of the same material, as was her crown, which curled back into a pair of spiraled horns. She regarded Velvet with a cool amber gaze. And only Velvet. She could barely look away.

"Or are we simply entertainment?" The white-clad twin continued.

Glynda scoffed lightly. "This is neither an orgy nor a party. You have been summoned for companionship."

"This one seems rather nervous, is it her first time?" The other twin asked. Velvet felt an annoyed pang. The twins hardly seemed interested. Were they not supposed to want her? Maybe this was a mistake. She glanced toward the smallest summon and found a far more interested look...a far more hungry look.

"Awfully generous of you." The white-clad twin mocked. "We have not experienced a virgin in...quite some time." She scanned Velvet's form. The pink and white summon winked, her brown eye changing to pink, briefly matching its twin. A flicker of flesh saw her tongue flick out to lick her lips.

"Velvet, what do you think of them?" Glynda asked.

Velvet blinked, looking from the smallest summon to the witch. Suddenly she felt a lot less sure, so many eyes upon her - hungry, bored...patient. The golden-eyed summon seemed to dull, her gaze more bronze now. A flicker of movement revealed a tail behind her rear, the same bony material curling by her left foot. "I uh...I'm sorry if I interrupted anything. I don't want an orgy. I'm just a bit lonely and..." Velvet heaved a breath, nervously brushing her hair over her shoulder. "You're all...interesting. I'm just uh...I've never really done this before."

The smallest summon took a step forward, startling Velvet. She felt Glynda tense in her periphery, but could only focus on the summon. She was borderline predatory in her demeanor, walking the line from her circle to Velvet's.

"Uh...hi?" Velvet managed, taking a step back as the summon crossed the chalk. It merely stood for a moment, gazing up at her, head quirked adorably to the side. Then the summon reached up, cupping her face, gentle and smooth, impossibly so...until Velvet felt herself yanked down, lips meeting her own in a surprisingly aggressive kiss - her very first. It tasted of strawberry, delicious and alluring, but it was all tainted by the sheer feeling of force behind the action. No matter how pleasurable the act, it did not feel right. "Mngh hey wait..." Velvet pulled away, taking a sudden breath. She had not realized she had been holding it. "That's...that's not really what I'm after..." Not really, if she just wanted someone to be physical with, she could have approached any number of the island's inhabitants. It was not the physical aspect that allured her...at least...not to that extent.

"Then why summon succubi?" A stronger, clearer voice inquired. The smaller summon huffed, turning on her heel as she began retracing the line to her circle.

Velvet turned her attention to the tallest summon. "Huh?" She exclaimed in a daze. The summon's eyes caught every ounce of Velvet's attention. They were no longer bronze but a metallic brown, so notable as the succubus began her own approach. Her stature should have been intimidating, but Velvet instead found it...impressive.

"Our kind feed off the lust of mortals, the desires and pleasures you hold dear provide us
"I don't want sex, I just want...I want someone to be there for me." Velvet tried to explain.

"So you summon a sex slave?" The summon pressed.

"I don't want a slave!" Velvet protested. "I just want someone so my home doesn't feel so damn empty all the time!"

"Then why the binding?" The summon countered.

"For her protection." Glynda answered.

"Oh yes, protection from the big, scary demons with pretty eyes and cute lips." The summon waved a clawed hand at the smallest summon, who stuck her tongue out in response. "Or the perpetually bored twins who keep whispering about how you'll look tied to your bed." She gestured to said twins, who scowled in disapproval. "Look at me. This is what you have summoned, not these glamour visages. This is what you wish to warm your home. Why this and not a true familiar, an empath perhaps?"

"Because Succubi are empaths, unless everything I've read has lied to me." Velvet replied. "You understand what I feel, and you want to use that to get what you want. It's that simple. I don't have to worry about using you or hurting you, because you want what you want and I get what I need. Don't you want me?"

"What I want is for you to understand what you ask, what your soul cries for." The summon reached out with a single talon, poking Velvet in the chest firmly, but not hard enough to do harm. The chitin of her forearms curled around the limb like ornate armor, it was beautiful. "You want for company, but what you desire is care. What a succubus can offer is only a facsimile of this desire."

"And I know that." Velvet nodded. "I don't expect something deeper. I'm not a fucking child. I just want to feel like I'm not alone. Is that really so much?"

"To ask of an inherently selfish being?" The summon raised her brow. "Ask the others, they will answer truthfully. You are prey to them. They want what you offer and will take until you are spent. Perhaps a night with them will stave off your ailments until something genuine can fill the void, but to expect something that truly benefits you is to invite heartbreak."

"So what about you?" Velvet asked. "Why aren't you like them?"

"Because I have seen the deepest desires of man, the darkest depths of the human heart." The summon answered. "I have feasted upon kings and queens, warlocks and wizards, left apprentices hollow and scarred. I gave all they desired and took in equal measure. I no longer hunger like a mewling pup. I tire of suffering, perpetuation and cruelty, the evils humans inflict upon themselves because they think a few words and pretty pictures will wipe away their pain." Chitin heels harshly kicked at the circle's edge, the air itself flared with energy. Velvet's hair stood on end as deep brown eyes glowed gold once more. "You have a mortal existence, a life to value. To gift me any measure of it would be a tragic sacrifice." The clawed finger found its way beneath her chin, rough, real, holding her gaze firm. "You can do so much better."

"Maybe." Velvet shrugged. "But right now this is what I want."

The summon hummed, edges of her mouth twitching upwards. "Very well then, the choice is
"And if I say no?" Velvet wondered, looking to Glynda.

"They return to the void, awaiting their next prey, and we discuss further options." Glynda replied.

Velvet took a deep breath and considered the summon's words. True, company was what she wanted, but care was what she missed. She was young when the bandits took her family, and in her trauma her grandmother had been very careful with her recovery, doting on her, in her own way, even as she grew too sickly to do so. Velvet missed her presence, missed her kind and encouraging words, her praise, her embrace...her cooking. Nothing would ever replace her family, nor her grandmother specifically. But if this summon could at least try, offer that facsimile, perhaps she could recover again. Perhaps she could find a new sense of normalcy. And maybe, just maybe, as foolish as all would make it seem, the summon would become more than just a presence - a friend, a companion. It was a fool's hope, but Velvet was a fool, a lonesome fool, willing to bind herself to a summon for the chance of reprieve.

"I'm sorry for wasting your time...even if it doesn't have much meaning to you...or my apologies."

Velvet looked to the smaller summon, who merely shrugged, and to the twins, who rolled their eyes. "But I accept your offer." Upon meeting the taller summon's eyes, she immediately seemed to slump, just a minuscule amount - in relief or disappointment, Velvet could not tell, but perhaps in time she would come to know.

"Very well." Glynda waved her hand and two of the circles erupted once more, leaving emptiness in their wake.

The taller summon strode forward once more. "I can promise nothing, but to offer my all." She spoke, stepping back into Velvet's circle.

"All I want is a little." Velvet smiled.

The summon seemed to find this amusing, her smirk softening to a smile, until she looked to Glynda. "How do you want to go about this?"

"Thoroughly." Glynda responded. "You are a guest in my domain. This island and its people are under my protection. What you do in the privacy of Velvet's home is of no concern to me, but in public you will glamour yourself."

"Obviously." The succubus huffed. "Do you have preferences?"

"Just...be yourself...if you have a preferred form other than this." Velvet answered.

The summon grinned, lifting Velvet's hand in her own. "Tell me truthfully, does this not upset you?"

"No...not really." Velvet shrugged, running her fingers along one of the spiral grooves. "I like it actually...it's strange, but interesting. The sketches don't do you justice."

"Oh, so you did know what to expect?" The summon wondered.

"Only a little." Velvet confirmed.
"Focus." Glynda clicked her fingers. "More than your pledge, you are responsible for Velvet's protection, do you understand?"

"I've never allowed any harm to come before...at least none that wasn't asked for or expected." The succubus grinned.

"And should any harm come, expected or no, I will personally ensure you live only to regret it." Glynda threatened with a glare. "Velvet is under my protection. Any who cross me pay dearly."

"Yes, yes, if you harm one hair and everything you humans love to bluster." The summon rolled her eyes, before meeting Velvet's own again. "Is there anything you wish to say?"

"I...don't think so just...I appreciate it, your honesty...can you keep that up?" Velvet requested.

"I think that may fall beneath harming one hair, to say the least." The succubus warned.

"I've been through a bunch already." Velvet chuckled. "I can take some blunt honesty."

"Fine then, honesty is a virtue and all." The summon nodded.

"Glynda?" Velvet asked.

The witch fixed the summon with a long, stern look, before letting loose a pent up breath. "Very well then, this won't take long."
"And bring me a present next time."

It had taken a bit of work and quick review of a few historical texts, but together Weiss and Yang had determined that the aspect was about 300 years old. Well, she had first entered the mortal realm about 300 years prior, judging by the names of places, the way people spoke, and the state of the world at the time. Before that, well, there was no telling just how old Yang really was. When outside the mortal world, aspects also existed outside time. Everything happened all at once and stretched over millennia, all at the same time. It was a concept so arcane even Yang could not really explain it, and she had lived it. In addition, even before that, like all aspects she had grown from a sprite. An aspect's time as a sprite was rarely remembered, at least in detail, and the length that stage of development varied widely by individual, probably a side effect of time's fluidity in that plain of existence.

"What was your first time on Remnant like?" Weiss asked, pen in hand and paper on the desk before her. "What did you do?" The details of an aspect's earliest memories would make for fascinating reading, even if such a narrative did not have a place in her guide to the supernatural.

"Well, it was my Rite of Passage, so it was a self summon." Yang began. "It's hard for an aspect to change dimensions of its own accord, takes a lot of energy. When I got here I was exhausted, way weaker than you're ever likely to see me. Still, I had a mission to complete. My father told me to do some good for humanity, without giving any real instructions. I wasn't sure what to do exactly, so I met with some Fire Cultists who were super happy to see me and really nice, and asked them if they needed any help. It was kind of hard to get a straight answer, what with them worshiping me and all—"

"Sounds like hell." Weiss rolled her eyes.

"Anyway, they told me about a gang of bandits that was attacking travelers near the temple." Yang continued. "I figured taking them out would help everyone in the area, not just the Cultists, so it was a good a trial as any. Long story short, I showed up at the bandit camp and by the time I was done, there was nothing left but ash. Then I heard dad's voice in my head. He was pleased that I'd taken care of the bandits, but had hoped I'd do something constructive rather than destructive. I went back to the Cultists and helped them forge tools to improve their farming. My father was happy, the Fire Cultists were happy and I was happy, so I went back home. All in all it was a cool experience."

"Fascinating..." Weiss scribbled the account on the paper. "I should look through surviving Cult records, they might have mentioned you."

"Well, the Cultists I helped weren't big on literacy, but I guess it's possible." Yang shrugged. "Great folks either way."

"You sound a lot more pro-humanity than most aspects I've met." Weiss noted.
"I...was." Yang sighed. "Humans can be amazing. After all, we aspects tend to take on your forms, so you must be doing something right. What you can accomplish in such a limited and tenuous life is incredible. It's just...a lot of what I've seen has been the dark side. After that first trip, I was summoned many times. Usually it was to be part of some witch or warlock's work, or to help take care of monsters or bandits threatening a village. But there were times when I was...I was made to do terrible things. My father always wanted me to create, but even when I was summoned to do good, it was invariably destructive. When put to evil purposes..."

"You don't have to continue if you don't want to," Weiss cut in, noticing her partner's rapid descent into melancholy.

"It's okay, it's not like I haven't gone over it all a million times in my head." Yang waved away her concern. "Besides, you can't really understand what it is to be an aspect without the negative side."

"Be that as it may-" Weiss started, only to be interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Want me to get it?" Yang offered.

"That's alright." Weiss shook her head, standing and heading to the door. She opened it to find Pyrrha and Ruby.

"Hey Weiss!" Ruby chirped.

"Hello Weiss." Pyrrha bowed.

"Ruby, Pyrrha." Weiss returned the greeting. "Would you like to come in?"

"That's alright." Pyrrha declined. "We're just-"

With a whoosh, Yang appeared behind Weiss. "Hey guys! What brings you here?"

"We were running some errands and decided to stop by." Pyrrha replied.

"And I made Weiss a present!" Ruby cheered.

"Aw, no present for me?" Yang faux pouted.

"Well, you don't technically wear clothes, so..." Ruby dug into her satchel, pulling forth a bundled red cloth. She handed it to the vampire.

"A scarf?" Weiss examined the garment. "That's very thoughtful. Thank you."

"I was gonna crochet a design into it, but I wasn't really sure what you'd want." Ruby fretted. "Port's has him fighting Grimm, and Penny's has Templar heraldry, but I couldn't think of anything for you. Sorry. If you want me to add a design, I'd be happy to do it!"

Weiss rubbed the scarf between her fingers. It was soft and almost warm to the touch, and carried Ruby's usual floral scent. "That's quite alright, I prefer simplicity." She paused for a moment. "Ruby, what did you use to make this?"

"I made yarn from my blood." Ruby replied. "Speaking of, are you hungry? You haven't fed in a while, and I don't want you getting sick again."

"I'm fine Ruby." Weiss insisted. "Thank you for the offer, and thank you again for this gift."

"Oh, okay, you're welcome." Ruby smiled. "Yang, if you want I could make you a scarf. I don't
want you to feel left out."

"Nah, seeing Weiss happy is enough of a gift for me." Yang waved off Ruby's concern. "You guys sure you don't wanna' stay for a while?"

"I'm afraid I have patients to tend to." Pyrrha lamented. "But Ruby can stay if she wants."

"That's alright, I should help out with them too." Ruby decided. "It's a lotta' work for one person."

"Well then, I suppose it's time we got going." Pyrrha suggested. "It was wonderful seeing the two of you."

"Yeah, it was great!" Ruby added.

"Come back anytime." Weiss offered.

"And bring me a present next time." Yang joked.

"Sure!" Ruby exclaimed. "See ya' later!"

"So long." Pyrrha bowed. She and Ruby turned and headed off toward Glynda's house.

As soon as Weiss closed the door, she wrapped the scarf around her face and inhaled deeply, drinking in its scent. "You couldn't wait to do that, huh?" Yang teased. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you had a thing for Rubes."

Weiss swatted at Yang's shoulder, only for her to turn immaterial before the blow landed. "Shush you."

It was strange walking home, not due to recent events, but rather how oddly ordinary it felt. After all, Velvet was walking alongside a succubus, a freshly glamoured succubus no less. Her name was Coco, or at least that was the name she had given. Glynda had not believed it true, stating that Coco was being cautious, that names held true power over such aspects. They could only be fully bound easily their true names. In a circumstance such as this, a succubus was lured by appealing catalysts and agreed to terms depending upon her tastes, not truly bound. Coco was no exception. She agreed to a protection bind, at the very least to protect her pride. She had no intention of harming Velvet, and she believed her.

Sure, Coco was quite intimidating, both in her true and glamoured forms. She was well dressed with tight black pants and long leather boots, gold buckles gleaming in the sun. A tan top hung loose on her form but in a purposeful manner, contrasting with the black cincher she wore around her waist. The plunging neckline was adorned with a variety of odd charms, fashioned from various minerals and metals. They jingled occasionally, but Coco's stride was sure and steady. She seemed unperturbed by her surroundings. Not that it was easy to tell, her enchanting eyes hidden behind dark tinted circular glasses. Clearly she had put some thought into this glamour. It did not seem hastily thrown together. Perhaps Coco would model for Velvet someday. She did not want to use her as a mannequin, but her hourglass figure would certainly look lovely in a dress.

"Looks like the winds had fun." Coco remarked, breaking Velvet from her musings. She realized they had stopped in front of her home, the shattered windows still allowing wind and snow alike into her bedroom.

Velvet groaned. "Damnit, I forgot...bugger." Pushing the door open, she briefly forgot her guest until solid heels thumped on the floor.
"Nice place though, reminds me a bit of Mistral." Coco admired, running her nails along the counter. "You sell clothing?"

"And make them." Velvet added. "I'm a seamstress by trade, like my grandmother before me."

"This is fine work." Coco admired, holding up a cloth jacket and nudging her glasses down with her thumb. "I'm sure some snooty master would turn his nose up at it, but in my experience such people do so out of insecurity."

"Thanks?" Velvet offered, hesitantly. She could not tell if it was a backhanded compliment or simply Coco's method of praise.

"So what happened to the windows?" Coco asked, folding the garment and replacing it in a simple fluid motion. Not even Velvet could fold that efficiently. She had never mastered that art, much to her grandmother's amusement.

"I think it's better to show you." Velvet sighed. There was weight upon her as she climbed the stairs. The last time she had done so had ended in tears, the time before that, agony.

Coco was silent as she followed. Velvet had to resist the urge to look back to reassure herself that it was real, that Coco was real, that all this pain had been for something, that something positive might come of it. She had to admit to herself, she was not sure what would happen now. Foresight was not her strong suit. She hoped for the best and feared the worst. And the worst always came. She just wanted a reprieve. Maybe Coco could provide one. Velvet was not a shrinking violet, life was pain, and she had learned this at a young age. It made her tough, but now so very tired.

"Some months ago, I tried to summon one of you…" Velvet began, crossing the kitchen that bisected the second floor. "I fucked up and got a hare instead...her name was Womp." Pushing open her bedroom door, Velvet stepped inside.

"Was?" Coco questioned, following.

Velvet stared at the brand on her floor as she passed, flopping down onto her bed with a sigh. "Last night, I tried again...and fucked up again...and it took Womp away from me." She watched as Coco stepped around the circle, examining the burns with a curious gaze.

"You did well, for a novice." Coco stopped before Velvet. "You probably screwed up the incantation." She stood before the failed circle, smirking. "That cute accent of yours would wreak havoc on any syllable."

Velvet scoffed, shaking her head. Coco took a seat beside her, the warmth of her presence oddly comforting. "I should have learned. I should have been happy with Womp...she was a good girl...everyone loved her."

"Not everyone is cut out for magic." Coco noted. "You gotta' have something special. Every witch or wizard I've met has been a tad touched upstairs." She lightly prodded the seamstress' head. "You work magic of your own anyway."

"I sew together scraps of cloth and leather to make people think they look better than they do." Velvet groused, much to Coco's amusement.

The succubus chuckled. "Damn right you do, and doctors patch up your body to make you think you'll live forever, and huntsmen kill the bad monsters to make you think you're safe. Mortal life is full of deceptions. Realize that and you can start turning them to your advantage."
"That's a shitty way of looking at things." Velvet complained.

"I'm not here to baby you Velv." Coco expressed, laying back on the mattress, splaying her arms out to run her fingers over the covers.

Velvet quirked her head at the succubus. "Oh, it's Velv now?"

"If it pleases you mistress." Coco salaciously purred.

Velvet laughed, genuinely this time. "I can't believe idiots get off to that noise."

"Oh you know humans, they love power, no matter how petty and small." Coco ranted. "Knowing some beautiful sex goddess is their slave gets them all kinds of worked up." She chuckled darkly. "Fools."

"Who are worse, men or women?" Velvet asked.

"Each in their own way." Coco replied. "In my experience, men are simple and straight to the point. They want sex, or to feel powerful. Women? Power is still at the heart of it, but there's usually more going on behind the scenes."

"Is the world really that fucked?" Velvet deflated.

"Maybe, maybe not." Coco shrugged. "Humans always bounce back from disasters. Armies are raised, kingdoms fall, the dust settles and the world figures itself out...none of that matters for you. You'll die before any of that happens."

"Oh wow, thanks." Velvet grumbled. "I just love being reminded of my own mortality." She flopped back, landing on the summon's arm.

"Isn't it great?" Coco grinned. "You get to worry about yourself for a short amount of time, I get to spend millennia wondering if the next idiot who summons me will be the one who knows my true name. Then I'm just another plaything for whoever that name passes to."

"It's really that bad?" Velvet inquired.

"Names have power Velv." Coco confirmed. "Not like for you mortals. Your name is just a label given to your form. Our names are our being, and when mortals get ahold of them, it's like being held by the throat."

"They can just do whatever they want with you?" Velvet asked.

"Whatever they want." Coco nodded. "It's worse than slavery."

"You don't have any control?" Velvet pressed.

"None." Coco replied. "You do what you're bound to do, and hope you don't hate it."

"That...fucking sucks." Velvet observed.

It was Coco's turn to laugh, loud and long. "Yeah, it does. Ask Blake about it someday."

"Blake isn't Glynda's slave." Velvet noted.

"No, but she was someone else's once." Coco explained. "Talk of the town so to speak."
"You're kidding, you gossip in...wherever you come from?" Velvet balked.

"The Planes of Pleasure." Coco purred. "Of course we do. You think it's just orgies and nudism over there?"

"Now I know you're fucking with me." Velvet grumbled. She yelped as Coco suddenly flipped her over, straddling her hips.

"Hmm...no, not yet." Coco murmured, glamour fading away. Her soft brown eyes gained their gold flecks, horns jutting proudly, and a single clawed finger trailing lightly down Velvet's collar. "I think for now we should do something about this draft, before you catch a cold." Leaning down, Coco brushed her lips against Velvet's freckled nose. "Don't you agree?"

Velvet could only barely manage a nod as she lost herself in the moment.

Dew's recovery was progressing well, but was not without its anomalies. For one, she should have been conscious by now. Both Pyrrha and Glynda agreed that they could detect no signs of physical trauma, now that she had recovered from the exposure that had nearly killed her. Her breathing was normal, her blood pressure a bit low but not outside safe limits, and her pulse was strong and steady. The only notable issue was a fluctuating body temperature. She would swing wildly from fever to near hypothermia, despite the room's stable magic-regulated temperature.

Glynda theorized that Dew had achieved some sort of magical awakening, probably while lost in the woods and near death. She certainly exuded magic energy. Pyrrha did not even need to enter the room to feel it. Just passing in the hallway was enough. That could explain her continued coma and the temperature swings, though Glynda had never known a case exactly like Dew's. It was impossible to know what had even befallen her, or how long she had been in the wilderness. She was a traveling merchant who regularly visited the settlements and far-flung homes all around Patch. She had not been seen around this part of the island for weeks, but that was not abnormal. Hopefully she could shed some light on the mystery when she woke up.

Pyrrha carefully injected a solution into Dew's arm. Glynda had prepared this mixture, as she had all of Dew's prior injections. At first they were meant to promote healing and provide emergency sustenance, but the focus increasingly fell upon waking her up. It would be far easier to care for her once she was conscious.

The injection complete, Pyrrha placed the syringe on a tray on the side table. It had no immediate effect as Dew remained still, her eyes shut. Putting her fingers to Dew's neck, Pyrrha checked her pulse. Stable, strong, same as always. She did feel a bit cold. Pyrrha gently pressed the back of her hand to Dew's forehead. It was indeed a little cold, but-

Dew's eyes shot open. In an instant her arm shot upward and she grabbed Pyrrha by the wrist. Dew's face contorted in fear and confusion and her mouth opened as if to scream, though no sound came forth. Her grip tightened and a sharp pain engulfed Pyrrha's arm as ice expanded from Dew's hand, encasing the limb. It took everything Pyrrha had to stifle a scream as jagged points of ice stabbed inward, cutting into her flesh.

Dew released Pyrrha, scrambling out of the bed only to stumble and fall before hastily crawling into the corner. There she curled up in the fetal position. Frost crept across the floor, up the walls and onto the nearby dresser. Dew's gaze snapped to around the room until she buried her face in her arms and began to sob.
"Glynda!" Pyrrha cried out, clutching her frozen arm. She held her other hand over the limb and whispered a spell, the ice disappearing wherever she touched. Unfortunately all that did was free her wounded arm, it still bled profusely from multiple punctures.

The sound of scrambling feet approached and Ruby burst through the door. She had only been one room away, chatting with the werewolves, when Pyrrha had cried out. "Oh gods, what happened?!" She gasped on seeing Pyrrha's damaged arm.

"Just an accident." Pyrrha groaned through gritted teeth. Blood and water mixed to turn her arm bright red.

"What's going on?" Glynda asked, arriving soon after Ruby.

"Dew is awake, she froze my arm and now…” Pyrrha reported, nodding toward the sobbing girl who remained curled up in the corner.

"Let me help!" Ruby exclaimed. Pyrrha offered her arm and Ruby took it in her hands, closing her eyes tight and concentrating. The blood separated from the water, filling the punctures as they knitted themselves closed.

Meanwhile, Glynda approached Dew, crouching beside her. She laid a hand on the girl's shoulder, persisting even as Dew flinched at her touch. Whatever happened to her must have been extremely traumatic. Glynda had witnessed scenes of uncontrolled magic like this before, and the cause was never a happy one. "It'll be alright." She soothed. "You're safe now." Glynda would tend to Dew, but first she had to take care of her own. She stood and approached Pyrrha, taking her hand and examining her newly healed arm. "Does it still hurt?"

"Yes." Pyrrha confirmed. "But it's nothing I can't handle." The way her eyes still watered belied that statement.

"You know the potions to drink." Glynda noted. Injuries were common while training as a witch, and though Pyrrha was more skilled and careful than most, she had suffered her share. "Go, now, I'll take it from here."

"Yes ma'am." Pyrrha agreed. She flexed her fingers and wrist, wincing at every movement. At least it seemed Ruby's healing had put everything important back where it was supposed to be. Pyrrha took Ruby by the hand and led her from the room, closing the door behind her. Dew flinched once more as the door clicked shut.

"Blake, hot chocolate please, with a teaspoon of cinnamon." Glynda spoke to her other half, the darkness around her flickering in reply. She lowered herself to the ground, crossing her legs by the bedside and observing her newest patient.
Dew was trembling now, the frost misting around her curious in emanation, a typical trait of a frightened awakening. Magic was strongly tied to emotions. Dew felt endangered and sought protection - Pyrrha had been the unfortunate victim of unfettered fear - and now this field of frost represented caution. Glynda had to tread carefully.

"Dew?" She spoke. The girl quivered but met her gaze, a single violet eye peeking out. "Do you remember me?" Dew rapidly nodded. "Good. I want to make it very clear to you that this is a safe place. You are in my home, under my protection. Do you understand?"

Dew shuddered, her eye shutting tight as she shakily nodded. "Ah...are they gone?" She whimpered.

Glynda raised a brow in question. *They?* "Are who gone?"

"The vampires!" Dew warbled, louder than expected.

"The vampires?" Glynda repeated. "Cinder? Did Cinder do this to you?"

Dew shook her head. "N-no, not her, s-she didn't care...Mercury, his name was Mercury. He did it. He...he..." Her breath hitched, her form wracked with convulsions as she began sobbing into her hands, the frost around her growing thick upon the ground.

With a click, the door briefly opened, Blake's essence trailing in. Glynda felt her presence on the bed above, and the strong smell of chocolate and cinnamon permeated the air. "Dew..." Glynda murmured, accepting the hot mug as it hovered by her side. "I cannot promise you that Mercury has left our island, but I can promise his companions have. Cinder and Emerald-"

"Dead?" Dew choked in question.

Glynda shook her head. "Cinder was wounded and captured, eventually taken away, her thrall alongside her."

Dew laughed, bitter and mirthless. "Cinder didn't care about me. I was Mercury's *pet*. But Emerald cared." Her voice hitched at the name. "Did anyone even look for me?"

"No one reported your absence," Glynda replied. "I assume both villages expected you were at the other."

"For a *month?*" Dew hissed, hands clenching into fists beneath her chin as she glared.

"I am sorry Dew, if I had known, I would have come for you myself." Glynda apologized.

"Like you did the vampires?" Dew spat, scowling.

"To my knowledge, there was only Cinder," Glynda defended. "We were not made aware of her companions until much later. There were two werewolves and a contingency of Templars scouring the woods for her. If there was any chance of finding you..." She heaved a heavy sigh, slowly extending the mug. "Nothing excuses my failure Dew. I am deeply sorry. You deserve better from me."

"It wasn't your fault..." Dew whispered, sniffling. "Cinder sent Mercury to throw off their scent, and the Templars..." She hitched, laughing. "Templars couldn't find their way through a single cornered maze." She shook her head, raising the cup to her lips and taking a small sip. "I remember laughing, as if it was the funniest thing I'd ever heard...but deep down I was just...trying to scream." With that the frost returned in full force. Her expression screwed up in confusion as she
stared at her cup. She reached in with a finger, tapping the contents, before holding the mug upside down. A block of frozen milk and chocolate fell to the ground with a dull thump. "Hmph...damn...more complications." She mumbled.

"You don't seem particularly surprised." Glynda observed, hoping a change of subject would offer a more positive outlook.

"Trauma induces magic...I read about it...I used to read a lot." Dew explained. "Is Pyrrha okay?"

"Shaken, but fine, thankfully." Glynda answered.

"Good...I'm sorry for my outburst." Dew responded.

"You had no control over your powers." Glynda waved away her concern. "As a child I once threw...a friend across a field when they startled me."

"I'll have to learn better then." Dew commented.

"Don't worry about it too much." Glynda advised. "Once you learn the basics, frost magic is quite a gentle art."

Dew hummed, fingers trailing around the rim of her cup. She sniffled again. "What happens now?"

"I'd like you to stay a while." Glynda requested. "You appear physically healthy, but trauma manifests most in the mind. Not now, but when you're ready, I'd like to discuss what went on in depth. Is that fair?" Dew nodded, but Glynda did not miss the way she visibly shrank at the idea. She would have to tread very lightly. "Very well. Do you feel up for some food? I don't know how long it's been since you last ate."

"I think so, I don't really know either...a lot of it is very...muffled." Dew sighed.

"I understand." Glynda nodded. "I can offer you answers for that when you are ready." She pushed herself to her feet, assisted by Blake's persistent essence.

"Thank you." Dew returned. She planted a hand on the floor and attempted to lift herself upward, only for her limb to shake, her eyes losing focus as she swayed. "Oh...dizzy."

"You are malnourished." Glynda warned. "We could only provide so much whilst you were unconscious." She offered her hand. The herbalist took it, easily pulled to her feet by the witch, stumbling into her chest.

"Gods...I feel horrid." Dew complained.

"Don't worry yourself dear." Glynda soothed, helping the girl sit back on the mattress, now vacated by Blake who stood by the door. "You lay back down and rest, and when I return you'll have a nice hearty meal to devour."

"I can't wait…" Dew gripped Glynda's hand in both her own. "I mean this Glynda, thank you." She looked up through tired, red-rimmed eyes and smiled for the first time.

Glynda returned that smile. "I always take care of my own Dew. Rest, recuperate, live and that will be thanks enough for me."

Dew had managed to eat little of the first meal Glynda presented her. It was not that she was not hungry, or that she did not like it, her body was simply not ready to eat very much just yet. In any
case, she spent most of the day and following night sleeping. Blake, who kept watch over her, reported fitful rest, but given what she had been forced to endure, that was hardly surprising. Glynda visited her again in the morning, offering a light breakfast that she managed to fully consume.

Dew in turn gave a few more details of her ordeal. She had been traveling the road from the port, but failed to reach the village before nightfall. Rather than risk traveling after dark, she set pulled her wagon off the road and set up camp. She had awoken when her horse began neighing and stamping, and emerged from her tent just in time to see Mercury rip out the animal's throat with his bare hands. Dew had tried to run, but he was much faster, seeming to teleport in front of her. One look into his eyes and her free will had been locked away.

There had been much crying and more uncontrolled magic as Dew recounted her tale, but Glynda saw some progress at least. The frost that surrounded her remained more contained, and she at least seemed more calm than she had been. Glynda only wished there was more she could do, but for now she would have to wait. Her other patients were doing rather well, with Ren's cough nearly gone. Nora's sight was still not improving, and she was still cranky, but her mood was a little lighter.

Just before noon, Glynda headed to the kitchen. As expected, she found Pyrrha there preparing lunch. She was grilling meat of some sort, beef judging by the smell. Lately everyone in the house had been eating more meat than usual. Werewolves needed it to stay healthy, and it did not make sense to make different meals for everyone. Ruby worked away at a nearby counter, preparing the meal's side dishes. For someone who did not have a human sense of taste, the food she produced was rather good.

"Pyrrha, how is your arm?" Glynda asked, stepping up beside her.

"Much better." Pyrrha replied, not diverting her focus from the food. "I have full range of motion and the pain has subsided, just some minor aches every now and again." She transferred the meat from the grill to a nearby plate and turned her focus to Glynda. "How is Dew?"

"Physically she's doing quite well." Glynda replied. "Psychologically...unstable would be a charitable assessment, and given her newfound magical abilities, that means dangerous. She's swinging between rage and detached assessment, and bottling up her stronger feelings as much as possible."

"What happened to her?" Pyrrha asked.

"She was enthralled by a companion of Cinder's, a certain Mercury." Glynda replied. "She hasn't said what he did with her, but she described herself as his 'pet,' so I'm sure you can guess. It also seems to have been a particularly brutal enthralment. Usually the victim's conscious mind is turned off so to speak, or their desires twisted to match the vampire's. In Dew's case it seems she was fully conscious of everything that happened, but unable to control herself, a prisoner in her own body if you will."

"That's...horrifying." Pyrrha managed, lowering her head. "Did she say what became of Mercury? I assume he's the one who attacked the Templars and I. Is he still on the island?"

"She doesn't know." Glynda answered. "I can't imagine he would have remained however. I suspect he would have left covertly at the earliest opportunity. With the Templars and werewolves pursuing him, and the entire island on guard, staying would only have resulted in his capture or death. Given the risk he took to save Cinder, he either has some affection for her, or a more tangible incentive to assist her. Either way, he would want to rejoin her as soon as possible. He's
almost certainly returned to the coven and is back under Salem's protection."

"He should be punished for what he did." Ruby interjected. "Cinder got burned at least. It's not fair that he just got away." Glynda and Pyrrha were taken aback. They had never seen Ruby angry before, not even mildly annoyed.

"Unfortunately that's just how it goes sometimes." Pyrrha sighed. "As much as I'd like to see him brought to justice, it's not worth a war with a Nosferatu."

"The world isn't always fair, and happy endings aren't guaranteed." Glynda noted.

"I know." Ruby frowned, shoulders slumping.

"What is Dew planning to do after she recovers?" Pyrrha changed the subject, hoping for something that would cheer Ruby up. Seeing her sad was just painful.

"Well, she lost all her money and possessions…" Glynda started. Pyrrha shot her a look, one begging for something positive. "... but with a little help I'm sure she'll be back in business in no time."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves." Glynda cautioned. "She's still weak, and might have plans of her own. Perhaps her family-" Glynda stopped speaking suddenly. Her expression turned serious and she began undoing the top buttons of her shirt.

"What is it?" Pyrrha inquired.

Glynda reached into her shirt, pulling free a crystal that hung around her neck. It glowed bright, pulsating red. "Danger…" She whispered. "I have to go."

"What's wrong?" Pyrrha asked.

"A family emergency." Glynda replied. "I'll explain when I get back." She rushed for the basement. Pyrrha and Ruby followed, watching as the witch grabbed a bag from the corner. It had been sitting there for all the time she had known Glynda, but Pyrrha had never really noticed it before.

"Can we help?" Ruby offered.


"Go ahead." Blake grumbled.

"You're coming too!" Glynda growled in response.

"That little crystal starts glowing and you rush off to your other family." Blake complained bitterly.

"They're not my other family, they're our family, and this is no time to have this argument." Glynda admonished. "It's never been red before!"

"Alright." Blake sighed and took her place at Glynda's side. The witch grabbed the aspect's wrist and the pair disappeared.

"What just happened?" Ruby asked.

"I'm not sure." Pyrrha admitted. "But I know it's not good."
"I didn't know Glynda had a family." Ruby noted. "I hope they're alright."

Pyrrha was unsure of what to say. She too had been in the dark about Glynda having a family. Sure, she knew Glynda had some deceased relatives. The witch had informed her of the fate of her sisters at the beginning of Pyrrha's training, a cautionary tale. Other than that, Glynda had never spoken of any living family members. Whoever and wherever they were, she clearly cared deeply about them to have left in such a rush, over Blake's objection no less.

"I hope they're alright too." Pyrrha finally spoke. "And I hope Glynda's alright."

Of all the things Velvet expected of her new companion, cooking for her was not one of them. Sharing a bed did not surprise her. Coco was a succubus, she knew what Velvet wanted, and chief among her desires was simple, natural affection. Velvet had melted into her embrace, the intimacy of the gesture like warm milk to her tired mind. She had not slept so soundly in months. Scratch that, years.

The next day started late, and slow. Dragging herself from Coco's arms proved...trying, not helped by the succubus' sure grip and...decidedly alluring scent...but there was work to be done. Windows had to be boarded, at least until new ones could be commissioned. Velvet still had commitments of her own to fulfill. With the Solstice celebration approaching, the demand for her work began to increase. Clothing was both a simple and practical gift - boots, jackets and gloves in particular. They would see constant, heavy use throughout the year. Or if Velvet worked well enough, two or three years.

Coco, to her credit, was quite the comforting shadow, and very useful to boot. By the time Velvet had dressed, the sound of sizzling had filled her kitchen, and the smell of fresh bacon wafted through the open door. It felt like ages since she had last had breakfast cooked for her, and Coco knew how to fry an egg - flipped, scrambled on toast with a generous helping of tomato sauce. Just like grandma used to make. Velvet was already falling in love.

The remainder of the day was fairly normal considering the circumstances. Velvet went through the motions, just...not alone. Coco followed her everywhere, a warmth at her side, filling the silence with questions and conversation. She was not ignorant of the world, yet still sought to learn of the world she would inhabit, the life Velvet led, her routine, her work...her dreams. It was nice to speak of it all, to someone who was genuinely interested. People rarely took more than a passing interest in her life. They came and went, Velvet little more than a footnote in their lives, another character in the grand story they wrote with each passing step.

Even if it was an illusion, the feeling Coco inspired within Velvet brought a new joy to her day. Each stitch sewn with a smile, each moment passing with a warmth in her heart, that she had so sorely missed.

"Hey hon." Coco's voice spoke from above. Velvet turned to see the succubus leaning on the banister, golden eyes gleaming down at her, the smell of fresh cooked beef already filling the room from above. "You better get your ass up to eat this nice meal I slaved away making for you."

Velvet laughed and gladly got her ass up. The dinner was delicious.
Chapter Summary

"I have...so many more questions."

"Once we're all healed up I think we're gonna' go lookin' for a place to make a den." Nora declared. "Running around and doing missions and all is fun - really fun sometimes - but I wanna' settle down and start a family. I like this place a lot, everyone's so nice."

"Given our recent injuries, I doubt Ozpin would oppose our choice." Ren added. "Plus, the lasting effects of our injuries would limit our capabilities."

"We'd have to get jobs though." Nora sighed. "Like normal person jobs."

"You could always serve as Huntsmen." Pyrrha suggested. "The island can't have too many."

"And I'm sure your skills could be useful in other jobs too." Ruby chimed in. "You're great trackers, so you could hunt, and you're really strong, lotsa' jobs need strength. Ooh, maybe you could help the islanders get along better with the spriggans!"

Ren heaved a heavy sigh and Nora's face screwed up in pain. "I don't think they want anything to do with us." She seemed to shrink in on herself. "They betrayed us."

"What do you mean?" Ruby asked. "They helped us, didn't they?"

"They told us where to find Cinder, true." Ren allowed. "But they failed to warn us about her companions, Mercury in particular."

"And he did this to us," Nora's voice warbled with anger and despair as tears welled in her eyes. "They knew what would happen."

"Maybe they didn't know." Pyrrha countered. "Or they didn't fully understand the situation."

"They knew." Nora growled through gritted teeth. "They know everything that happens in the forest. And even if they didn't think Mercury would attack us, he had to go through their domain to do so. They could have stopped him or warned us, but they didn't."

"Maybe there's more to it than that." Ruby soothed. "There could have been stuff going on we don't know about."

"There's only one way to know for sure." Nora huffed. "I have to ask them. I have to know for sure."

"Once your eyes heal-" Pyrrha started.

"My eyes aren't going to heal!" Nora shouted. "They're not getting any better! And I want them to see, I want them to see what they've done to us!"
"When Glynda gets back I'll talk to her about it." Pyrrha sighed. "She'll probably want to go as well. I'm sure she has some of the same questions."

"Fine." Nora crossed her arms across her chest. "What are we gonna' do until then?"

"It's almost dinnertime, so I suppose Ruby and I should begin preparing the meal." Pyrrha replied.

"I can help if you need an extra set of hands." Ren offered.

"Only if I can come down to the kitchen with you." Nora insisted.

"You'll have to get dressed first." Ren noted.

"Oh fine, I'll put clothes on." Nora threw off the blanket to reveal her nude body. "Dress me!"

"We'll just go ahead and get started." Pyrrha blocked the view with her hand, standing and ushering Ruby out the door.

"Why don't you wanna' look at Nora when she's naked?" Ruby asked as the pair walked down the hall. "She's beautiful."

"She is, but nudity...it's embarrassing." Pyrrha tried to explain.

"She doesn't seem embarrassed." Ruby observed.

"I'm sure she isn't, but I am." Pyrrha began descending the stairs.

"Why?" Ruby asked.

"It's...hard to explain." Pyrrha sighed. "Modesty is important to humans, and standing naked before someone has...certain connotations. I'm just not comfortable with it."

"Oh...huh..." Ruby responded. "So what are we having for dinner?"

"I'm not sure, maybe-" Pyrrha started.

With a whoosh, a rush of air filled the hallway. Pyrrha could feel a surge of void energy in the living room. Glynda had returned. Followed closely by Ruby, Pyrrha rushed to meet her, stopped short by the sight before her. Glynda and Blake - who looked more annoyed than when she had left, and departed without a word - were there as expected, but there was something else...someone else. Pyrrha opened her mouth as if to speak but could think of no words.

"Pyrrha, Ruby." Glynda greeted with a smile. "This is my daughter, Ilia."

The creature standing before them - if standing was an accurate descriptor - cowered by Glynda's side, clinging to the witch's arm with a slight tremble, bright blue eyes staring wide back at them. From the waist up she was a seemingly normal looking teenage girl - perhaps sixteen by Pyrrha's estimation - with pale brown skin, freckles dotting her arms and face in even patterns. Her tangled hair was brown, pulled back into a loose ponytail and tied with what looked like a bit of vine, revealing slightly pointed ears. Were it not for them and the slitted reptilian pupils, she may have passed for a regular human.

From the waist down, however, things were very different. A mass of scales began at her hips, as her body transitioned into the lengthy tail of a snake. The scales were a deeper, gleaming brown, contrasting with the tan of her...belly, so to speak. It was as if a giant serpent has begun swallowing her whole. But Pyrrha knew better. This was no victim, this was a lamia. There was a lamia in her
home, and Glynda claimed her as her daughter.

"Um...hello, I'm Pyrrha, Glynda's apprentice." She introduced herself. "It's nice to meet you." She offered a smile, though an uneasy one.

Glynda noticed Pyrrha's discomfort. "I'm sure you have many questions, and I'll answer them in due course."

"Hi, I'm Ruby!" She cheered. The lamia flinched at her exclamation. "I've never met a lamia before."

"Ilia, there's nothing to be afraid of, say hello." Glynda encouraged.

"H-hello." Ilia managed.

Ruby approached, viewing Ilia from the side. The lamia shuffled in an attempt to better hide herself behind Glynda. "Your tail looks really cool." Ruby enthused. "Can I touch it?"

"Ruby-" Pyrrha tried to step in.

Ilia hesitated, looking to Glynda, who offered an encouraging nod. "O-okay." The lamia allowed.

Ruby knelt down and gently ran her hand across the scales on top of Ilia's tail. "Ooh, it's so smooth."

"I apologize for leaving so suddenly." Glynda said as Ruby stood up and returned to Pyrrha's side. "I'm sure you were worried. Ilia's mother has a crystal linked to mine, and she indicated that the family was in danger, so there was no time to waste. It turns out Ilia here has developed an affinity for magic, something her family was unable to properly handle. As a result, she will be living here for the foreseeable future."

"You can do magic too?" Ruby quirked her brow. "Awesome!"

Before Glynda could offer any further explanation, Ren and Nora descended the stairs, joining the group in the living room. Ilia hid behind the witch with renewed unease. "I smell someone new." Nora noted after sniffing the air. "Who is it?"

"My daughter Ilia." Glynda answered.

Nora did her best to look, staring at the girl with unfocused eyes. "You have a brown blob daughter!"

"Close, but not quite." Glynda rolled her eyes. "She's a lamia."

"Oh, I thought something smelled tasty." Nora grinned.

Ilia whined and hid behind Glynda. "Shhh, it's okay my dear." Glynda soothed. "She's only joking...poorly."

"My apologies." Ren bowed. "We're being impolite. I'm Lie Ren, and she is Nora Valkyrie. We're werewolves, currently under Glynda's medical care."

"They may look intimidating, and Nora can be loud, but you need not fear them." Glynda noted. "Now, I believe it's about time for dinner. Pyrrha and Ruby, if you'd be so kind as to prepare the meal, I'll take Ilia up to meet Dew and take a bath, and to show her where she'll be sleeping. It's already late, so we'll leave setting up a proper nest until tomorrow."
"Does...um...does Ilia have any special dietary concerns?" Pyrrha asked.

"Lamia are omnivores, and anything safe for a human should be safe for her." Glynda replied. "I think meat of some kind would be the best option."

Pyrrha nodded. "Okay, extra meat."

"Alright, Ilia, the bath is upstairs." Glynda indicated, pointing to the staircase. "Let's...oh...can you climb stairs?" Ilia looked at the stairs for a moment before nodding. Rather than slithering side to side, she rippled the underside of her tail, to move across the floor. On reaching the stairs she leaned back. Her tail bunched up on each successive step as she smoothly ascended. It was at once strange and beautiful to behold. Glynda quickly followed, though it seemed Ilia was happy enough to be away from Nora.

Pyrrha gazed at the stairs for a moment after Glynda and Ilia had disappeared from view. "I...did not at all foresee this."

When Glynda and Ilia joined the others in the dining room, the lamia was thankfully wearing one of the witch's old sweatshirts. Ilia's breasts lacked nipples, but seeing her bare-chested still filled Pyrrha with embarrassment. In addition to the clothing, the lamia's hair was now tied back into a ponytail that was neater than before, and far less tangled than it had been. She seemed much more at ease with her new surroundings and the people in it, though dinner was somewhat awkward.

Ilia hesitated to begin eating, and Pyrrha briefly feared the food looked or smelled unappealing to her, but the lamia soon began what was clearly a shaky imitation of human dining, using utensils and cutting her steak into bite-sized pieces, but not chewing them. Pyrrha did get a good look at Ilia's teeth. They appeared mostly human, except for a pair of fangs that were longer than even a vampire's. It was hard to judge from Ilia's reactions whether or not she enjoyed the food, but she did eat everything served to her. Perhaps she was malnourished, or simply did not wish to appear ungrateful.

After the meal, Glynda took Ilia to relax in the living room. The lamia clung to her mother's hand, pressing herself into Glynda's side as she sat in an armchair. The others took the couch opposite, Nora almost sitting on Ruby in the process. As the witch surely expected, the others followed. She decided to get the most obvious ones out of the way herself. "Now, I'm sure you're all abuzz with questions. Yes, Ilia is my daughter, yes she happens to be a lamia. There is a reasonable explanation behind her existence." Glynda began. "Seventeen years ago, I found myself researching a number of creatures, and found that there was very little information on the lamia, and that little happened to be biased, and in retrospect, incredibly inaccurate."

Ilia's narrow, snake-like tongue flicked out, her wide blue eyes darting between the four listeners.

"To correct this, Blake and I tracked down a lamia." Glynda continued. "I played the part of a helpless damsel, and when she took the bait, Blake restrained her. Looking back, the whole endeavor was rather harsh on Ilia's mother. She was terrified, forced to listen as I explained my plan. I wished to experience a lamia's life cycle, to be impregnated, and carry her young to term, so I may study and document the process. We offered food as a token of our good will, with the promise of more to come. Should she agree, I would become a willing partner, one who could keep both her and her children safe, her location secure, and provide food consistently. If she refused, her only alternative would be to capture an unwilling victim, something that would put her and her children at risk." Glynda adjusted her glasses. "She did not take long to agree."

"That sounds rather...coercive." Ren noted.
"It was, however at the time my outlook was decidedly...scientific." Glynda admitted. "This was an experiment, a journey for knowledge. The relationship, the family did not interest me." She sighed, softly stroking Ilia's hand with her free one. Ilia's eyes grew lidded, her gaze less jittery.

"Regardless, over the succeeding months we had plenty of time to grow familiar. The lamia's name was Cillia, and with some prying I was able to learn about her life to that point, and gain new perspective on the lamia way of life, one no one had ever documented before...but it wasn't until I...gave birth, for lack of a better term, that my view started to change. There were seven eggs—"

"Seven?" Pyrrha gasped, staring at Glynda's belly.

"Yes, seven." Glynda confirmed, her hand subconsciously laying over her belly, a small smile on her face. That smile faded quickly, her expression downcast. "Unfortunately, only five hatched...and not long after I...we, lost one of our hatchlings...it...was the tipping point. Long had my feelings on the matter been steeped in science, but along the way I had become a mother. These hatchlings, Ilia…"

Glynda reached back to gently caress the lamia's face, who nuzzled into the contact with a content smile. "They were my children, and I loved them...I stayed for several months longer, but it was clear that my presence was a cause of tension." Wiping her eyes, Glynda schooled her expression once more. "Cillia trusts me, of that I'm sure, but lamia tend to be solitary creatures. My human meddling risked disrupting the natural rearing process...I fashioned a beacon, to summon me in times of need."

The witch pulled her necklace free, holding it for all to see. "Yellow for illness, red for danger, among other things...the first warning came not long after my departure. Ilia fell gravely ill, and I fought long and hard to cure her...I feel I was more relieved than Cillia. Lamia are far more pragmatic about their young. We humans however are far more attached. I was proud to have saved my daughter, and prouder still that Ilia survived."

Glynda smiled at Ilia, and the lamia smiled back. "Over the years my visits were rare, though no more emergencies occurred." Glynda went on. "As it happens, Ilia has developed an affinity for magic. Lamia have no experience with the subject, so Cillia was unprepared to deal with the situation, and her sisters were troubled. Today she accidently set the nest on fire."

Ilia huffed, burying her face in the chair's armrest. Glynda chuckled, tucking a stray hair behind her pointy ear. "It was quickly extinguished, but it became clear that Ilia needed someone who could help her understand and properly harness her magic, or the situation would only worsen. That is why I have brought her here. Once she can properly control her abilities, Ilia will be free to choose if she wishes to stay, or leave." Ilia peeked back up, gazing at her mother, who stared right back, a gentle smile on her face. "I think that about covers it."

"I have...so many more questions." Pyrrha noted.

"I'm sure." Glynda nodded. "Unfortunately it's already late, and I haven't even begun preparing Ilia's nest." She stood, the lamia following suit, keeping a tight grip on her hand. "If you'd rather not wait for answers, you could always read my book." She walked over to a bookcase against the wall and pulled out a nondescript tome. After freeing her hand from Ilia's, she ducked down and pulled a notebook from the bottom shelf. "I suspect my notes would help as well. Blake also illustrated certain scenes, and she's just as good an artist as Ruby. It seems all aspects share that talent."

Glynda handed the books to Pyrrha, who stared at the covers, hesitating to open either. "This is—"

"Shocking, I know." Glynda interrupted. "I'm sure this is a lot to take in so suddenly. We can talk
more tomorrow." She turned her attention back to Ilia. "Will you be alright going to your room on your own? I have to get a few things from the basement." Ilia nodded and headed up the stairs. "Ruby, would you be so kind as to help me. There's nothing heavy, just a few...unwieldy items."

"Sure." Ruby agreed, jumping to her feet.

Ruby followed Glynda down to the basement. There the witch opened a portal into what appeared to be a normal, if cluttered, room. Inside were a number of items, mostly random odds and ends that the average person would keep in a shed or attic. Glynda gathered a number of blankets and furs, directing Ruby to collect a few pillows. Ruby carried it all, draped across her shoulders and tucked under her arms. Glynda did not leave empty-handed however. She carried a mattress, following Ruby out of the portal which closed behind them. They brought they assorted items up to the attic where Ilia was waiting.

"It's just a start, but tomorrow we can work on it more." Glynda explained as Ruby laid the items out on the floor. "For tonight, just try to get the room comfortable enough to sleep in." Ilia nodded and set about arranging the items, mostly in the corners and edges of the room. "Thank you for your help Ruby."

"You're welcome!" Ruby cheered. She headed downstairs, giving Glynda and Ilia some privacy. She was just in time to see Ren and Nora heading into their room, and bid them goodnight before heading down to the living room. Pyrrha was still staring at the books. "Are you okay?"

"Truthfully, no." Pyrrha admitted. "I thought I knew Glynda well, but it seems there's much more to her than she told me."

"Maybe you just never asked the right questions." Ruby suggested, sitting on the couch beside Pyrrha.

"That's what's bothering me." Pyrrha sighed. "I fear I was too focused on what knowledge Glynda could offer, and not enough on her as a person. It was selfish of me."

"Of all people, I'm sure you weren't being selfish." Ruby assured her. "Everyone has their secrets right?"

"I suppose so." Pyrrha allowed, managing a smile. "Now, if only I could work up the courage to read these."

"Why do you need courage for that?" Ruby inquired.

"Remember our discussion of nudity and modesty?" Pyrrha asked. Ruby nodded. "The reasons are similar...and just as difficult to explain."
Left alone, Glynda finally let out a sigh of relief. The day was over, her family was safe, Ilia was home, and everything could calm down once more. She turned to her daughter, now slithering into the freshly blanketed mattress, the tip of her tail still twitching nervously as she looked around the room, those beautiful blue eyes wide with tense curiosity. Glynda felt her heart ache at the expression. She felt guilty, this was a dream come true, to be charged with the care of her own...well not flesh and blood, but Ilia was no less her daughter than Blake was her wife. The circumstances were unfortunate, but Ilia was not far off leaving the nest anyway. Just a few more months, the dawn of spring would be upon them, and her hatchlings would be full grown lamia...and she may never have seen them again.

Now was not the time for such realities. Her family was safe. Cillia, Aya, Theela, Hyala and Ilia all, perfectly healthy, safe and sound. For the time being, she needed to tend to Ilia.

"Ilia my dear." Glynda crooned. The lamia snapped to attention at her approach. Glynda held her arms open with a smile and braced herself as the lamia hastily slithered into her embrace, nuzzling beneath her chin, breathing in her scent. She planted a kiss upon the girl's hair with a chuckle. "How are you feeling my sweet?" Ilia hummed in contentment. Glynda tutted. "Ilia, use your words."

Ilia huffed. "I feel good."

"Good girl." Glynda whispered. "And what do you think of your housemates?"

"Flower Girl smells nice...Tall Girl is afraid of me." Ilia observed.

"Pyrrha is merely unnerved." Glynda shifted to sit on the mattress, Ilia pulling away only to better adjust for comfort. "She was unaware of you, of your mother and sisters. To suddenly be confronted with that reality has...surprised her."

"Why?" Ilia asked, moving her head to lay in Glynda's lap, her tail splayed out over the makeshift nest.

"Because Pyrrha cultivates very simple views of the world." Glynda replied. "They help her feel safe, and to an extent I nurture this, but now her view of me has been upheaved. She will need some time to adjust. You should spend some time with her tomorrow, she will take good care of you."

"Is she like me?" Ilia asked.

Glynda had to admit, it was impressive that Ilia had noted that aspect of Pyrrha so soon, from body language and deference alone. "In a way." She confirmed. "Unlike you I did not carry her. She entered my care much later in life, but I take care of her as I would you...she is important to me,
and you may consider her a sister if you wish."

"I will try mama...where is Bond Mother?" Ilia spoke in a small, timid voice.

Glynda found herself sighing in annoyance. "Blake is visiting a close friend, to discuss some important matters." She excused, poorly. "She will be home tomorrow, I promise."

"I miss her." Ilia noted.

"I know dear." Glynda soothed, gently stroking her daughter's hair. "She will warm to you, in time."

Ilia let out a small whine, her tail slithering to surround Glynda, the small lamia engulfing her Womb Mother, snuggling further into her warmth. Glynda could not help but smile. Of her daughters, Ilia had always been more drawn to her. The rare visits she paid always saw Ilia slithering out first to greet them. Her sisters followed their Brood Mother's example. Glynda was their Womb Mother, she carried them to term and cared for their health. Once she left, they continued to grow without a second thought spared. It was cold, but pragmatic. Most lamia set their mates free. Some killed them outright. Propagation and survival were their strongest instincts, and it had taken some time for Glynda to truly understand the extent of this.

Ilia though attached herself to Glynda, and much to her chagrin, Blake. The aspect had never approved of the experiment, and Glynda's ensuing attachment only complicated the matter. Blake had feared for her safety, then her sanity, and as the years went on, her heart. The passing of the first hatchling had shaken Glynda deeply. Blake had avoided the subject to the best of her ability, but Glynda knew Blake had felt something too, and her absence further confirmed this.

Now here was Ilia, on the same island, living in their home. Blake would not be able to avoid her forever. Ilia was as much her daughter as Glynda's, and the lamia loved her regardless of treatment. Ilia's soul was more gentle than those of her sisters. Glynda wondered if more of her soul had passed to her than the others. It would explain the magic, truly an anomaly, her scientific side brimmed with curiosity. Her motherly side, however, just wanted her daughter happy and safe.

"Today has been long and trying." Glynda whispered, still running her fingers through Ilia's hair. "We should sleep. Tomorrow will be a new day, full of new things for you to see and do."

"Will you stay?" Ilia asked.

"Of course I will my dear." Glynda nodded. "Allow me to close the door."

Glynda pecked Ilia on her brow as she stood, allowing her clothes to dematerialize as she strode to the door. She had not been a nudist before her time with Cillia, but as time progressed it became less and less comfortable to wear any. Just prior to her departure, it felt alien to put them on once more. It was not until Blake taught her to weave shadow that she was able to feel comfortable while clothed, but even so, there was something calming, freeing about being bare. The way the air brushed past her skin, the wood creaking beneath her feet, the texture of her daughter's scales sliding back around her. It reminded her that life...existence was beautiful, and worth experiencing raw and unfettered. But none brought her such comfort as the heart beat of Ilia, steady beneath her ear. She thanked the gods for their blessing, and slept soundly.

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The rabbit was well-fed, but that did not mean it stopped looking for food. As it hopped along on the way back to its burrow, it sniffed at the air and the ground, looking for the odd morsel. It was aware of the humans nearby, three of them, standing some distance away. That was nothing
unusual, they were frequently in the area. They were no threat, and too far away to matter anyway. The rabbit did not know, but its breakfast had come courtesy of their garden. The grass that filled the field near the garden soon gave way to dirt and sand as it crossed into the forest.

Trees towered over the tiny animal and the ground began to undulate far more than in the field. Up and down, up and down, the rabbit hopped around the roots and still remaining piles of dead leaves. It paused for a moment, sniffing the air. There was a new smell. Then a flash of movement out of the corner of its eye. The rabbit leapt out of the way just as an unfamiliar creature lunged out of a pile of detritus and slammed down where it had been standing. Another moment, another step closer, and escape would have been impossible.

Ilia quickly recovered from her initial miss. She had sprung from her hiding place too early and missed her prey. As the rabbit sprinted away, Ilia was in hot pursuit, effortlessly slithering over the uneven ground, gaining with every passing meter. The rabbit was fast, but over ground like this, she was faster. The animal slalomed through the trees in an effort to lose her, but the lamia had no trouble following. Each turn only slowed it down, allowing Ilia to close in. Just as Ilia was upon her prey, it disappeared into a hole in the ground. The hole was hidden beneath the gnarled roots of a tree, almost perfectly camouflaged, the ideal spot for the entrance to the rabbit's burrow. Ilia dove as the animal rushed inside, thrusting her arm into the burrow after it.

Glynda, Pyrrha and Ruby caught up just in time to find Ilia shoulder-deep in the burrow. She writhed and flailed, tail slapping against the ground, struggling to reach just a little farther. Surely her prey was just inches away. Then, with a sigh, she fell still. After lying on the ground for a few moments, Ilia whined, pulled her arm from the burrow and rose upright. She clenched her fists and gritted her teeth. It was another failed hunt. Another. Her sisters always caught something, and she went home hungry, relying on her mother to bring her food out of pity.

With a grunt, Ilia slammed her fist against a nearby tree. In that instant, fire exploded from her fist. The flames shot up the bark and soon the tree was engulfed, a towering column of smoke rising above the forest. Ilia gasped and sprung back, hissing as she took in the sight. Fire, again. But if magic caused the problem, it could solve it too. She had seen Glynda perform magic, using all sorts of elements. Ilia did her best imitation of the witch, spreading her arms wide and gesturing before directing her hands at the burning tree.

Fire jetted from Ilia's hands, adding to the already impressive inferno above her. She groaned and whined, turning toward Glynda and the others with a pathetic look on her face. The witch rushed over, casting frost to smother the flames before they could spread to neighboring trees. Ilia slithered away slowly, dejected, heading for home a failure as she had so many times before.

"It's okay Ilia." Pyrrha spoke, stepping up beside the lamia, who turned to face her. "You just need some practice, a little patience, and you'll get it." Ilia looked unconvinced.

"Plus that fire was really cool!" Ruby cheered. "I wish I could cast fire like that."

"I hate fire." Ilia hissed. She slithered on, faster this time, leaving the others behind. She appreciated what they were trying to do. Her mother had tried similar encouragement, for a while at least. She should have just accepted the breakfast Pyrrha had cooked her. It would have saved her the frustration and embarrassment. Hunting...stupid. Why did she even want to hunt? She sucked at hunting. She always would. No amount of practice would make her better, it never had. Perhaps she would make a better human than lamia.

After returning home, Ilia took a bath. She quite enjoyed human bathing. Lamia regularly bathed, to reduce their scent to hide them from both predators and prey, but they obviously did not have
access to the soaps and shampoos humans used. They made Ilia feel so clean, and they smelled quite nice. Getting dressed afterwards was another new and enjoyable experience. She did not yet understand why humans wore clothes, but they were pretty and kept her warm. Lamia were warm blooded, but did not have the robust body temperature stability of humans, leaving them much more susceptible to changes in ambient temperature. Her new home was colder than she would have liked, but Glynda's sweatshirts kept Ilia nice and warm.

Ilia put her hair up into a ponytail, holding it in place with one of the stretchy bands humans used. They were quite a lot easier to work with than the bits of vine she had used back home. There was a knock at the door, and Ilia quickly moved to open it. She found Glynda waiting there. "Mama." Ilia shrank and cast her gaze downward.

"Come now, cheer up." Glynda implored. She gently lifted Ilia's chin until she met her gaze, offering a reassuring smile. "I'm not here to scold you." Ilia managed to smile and straightened her posture a bit. "Why don't we take a little trip into town? I'll show you around, and you can meet some of my friends." Ilia dipped again, her face telegraphing her unease. "We could go visit Uncle Port!"

"Uncle Port?" Ilia spoke, her expression brightening. Glynda had told her stories of Uncle Port. He was a protector, like Blake, who had traveled the lands protecting the weak and fighting for justice and love. He had met and befriended all manner of magical creatures, just like Glynda.

So, after gathering Pyrrha and Ruby, Glynda led Ilia into town. The temperature had hardly warmed from the morning, but Ilia was kept warm by an undershirt, sweatshirt and winter coat. They were all a bit oversized, but they would have to do for now. Glynda promised to get Ilia some clothing that fit properly. Blake would surely be willing to weave some from her shadows, just as she did for Glynda. As the group moved through the town, Ilia was on the receiving end of strange looks from the few townspeople out and walking the streets. It could have been worse, all things considered.

"That's where our good friend Velvet lives and works." Glynda suddenly spoke, pointing to an unassuming building. "She's a kind girl who loves to make clothes." Just a little farther down the road, they came upon a small building with weapons, armor and tools in the windows. "This is where Uncle Port works." Glynda announced. "He's a blacksmith." Ilia was not familiar with the term 'blacksmith' but judging by what was on display, that meant he made things with metal.

Upon entering, they found it occupied by a large, mustachioed man who was hard at work hammering on a piece of metal. He looked up and spotted his guests. "Ah, Glynda! It's been too long since you've visited! What brings...well hello." He put his tools aside and approached, stooping down to get a better look at Ilia. She was tempted to hide, tightly squeezing her mother's hand.

"This is my daughter, Ilia." Glynda introduced. "Ilia, meet your Uncle Port."

"Ilia!" Port boomed. "Your mother's told me a lot about you!"

"And I've told her about you." Glynda noted. "Go on Ilia, say hello."

"Hello." Ilia managed, barely louder than a whisper. She raised her hand in a tentative wave.

"You're even cuter than I'd imagined." Port exclaimed with a hearty laugh. "I didn't think I'd ever get the chance to meet you. What brings you all the way to Patch?"

"Ilia's developed an affinity for magic." Glynda explained. "I'll be teaching her to harness her
powers."

"That makes sense, though it's quite unusual for a lamia to have magical abilities." Port scratched his chin.

"She's the only case I know of." Glynda nodded.

"So, where's Blake?" Port asked. "I wouldn't expect her to miss a family outing like this."

"She's just being difficult." Glynda excused. "She thinks bringing Ilia here will hurt her natural development."

"Oh nonsense." Port scoffed. "I once knew a lamia who was raised by humans from when she was a hatchling!"

"Really, you never told that story." Pyrrha observed.

"It wasn't very exciting, and doesn't really have anything to do with being a Huntsman, so it was never relevant." Port shrugged. "Well, not until now at least." He smiled as he reminisced. "I was in Vacuo, exploring mostly, but doing the occasional contract whenever I ran out of money. I walked into a bar after one night of hunting, and I was shocked, shocked, to find a lamia drinking at one of the tables! Even stranger, she was wearing an armored breastplate over a padded shirt. I was tempted to go right up to her to ask about her life, but I was sure she must be asked similar questions all the time, and I did not want to be rude."

"If you didn't ask her, how did you learn her story?" Ruby asked.

"The next day, I signed up to do a routine patrol of the main road." Port continued. "Bandits were always a problem you see. I headed out to begin the patrol, and who did I find but Ela! Of course I didn't know her name yet, but she introduced herself, as did I. I was still a hesitant to ask, but as we got going she guessed what I was thinking...or maybe I was making a face or staring. In any case, she asked if I was wondering how a lamia came to be living among humans. I confirmed I was, and she told me her tale. She had been orphaned as a hatchling. During a storm, a tree fell and crushed her mother, and when a man and his wife found her, none of her sisters were there either. Normally humans kill lamia on sight, but the woman convinced her husband to take Ela in. They were farmers who lived far from any towns, and Grimm were always a problem. Lamia were known to be ferocious fighters, particularly adept at killing Grimm. If they raised Ela to adulthood, she could protect the farm."

"That's sounds rather...selfish." Pyrrha noted.

"Yes, it does." Port confirmed. "But as they raised her, Ela became a proper member of the family, just as loved by her adoptive parents as their own children. She had a happy childhood, and when she grew to maturing she began protecting the farm as planned, but she never had to stand guard alone, always joined by one of her siblings. She wasn't just a soldier there to protect them, she was truly a member of the family. They even offered to help her find a willing mate."

"What went wrong?" Glynda asked. "She wouldn't have left her family unless there was a reason."

"It's sad, but yes, there was a problem." Port's mood darkened. "Ela had become rather well known around the area, quite the curiosity. Most came to accept her, but not everyone who heard of her found the story heartwarming. A group of miscreants got together, determined to kill Ela. They held no malice towards her in particular, or lamia in general, they just wanted her skin. Lamia hide is rare and valuable, with scales used as armor and sometimes an alchemy ingredient. The poachers
attacked the farm, and though Ela was able to fight them off, one of her brothers was wounded. She realized her family would never be safe as long as she was around, so she bid them a tearful farewell and embarked on a new life as an adventurer.

"That's really sad." Ruby sighed. "She never saw her family again?"

"No, no, she would visit from time to time, but always secretly." Port shook his head. "She could never stay for long however. She was sad to have to leave them, but she enjoyed her new life. As for our patrol, we didn't encounter anything and came back at the end of the day without anything of note to report. Then we parted ways. As far as I know, she's still out there exploring, though she'd be rather old by now. This all happened quite a long time ago."

"Fascinating." Glynda commented. "I would have loved to meet her. I still would."

"So, Ilia, how are you liking your new home?" Port asked.

"It's...alright." Ilia shrugged.

"She's a little discouraged." Glynda explained. "She had some trouble hunting this morning."

"Oh, that's nothing to be worried about." Port waved. "Ela hated hunting by hand too, called it a waste of effort and too unreliable. In fact she...hmm...this gives me an idea." He started towards the back room, pausing at the door. "I'm sorry to cut our get-together short, but you've just given me an idea. Please, come back tomorrow, it'll be ready then!"

"What?" Ruby asked.

"That's a surprise!" Port laughed. "The perfect welcome gift for our Ilia!" He disappeared into the back room.

"I'm almost afraid to see what he comes up with." Pyrrha chuckled.

"Yes, I'm sure it will be...interesting." Glynda smirked. She turned her attention to her daughter. "Now Ilia, why don't we go to meet some more friends?" Ilia hesitated for a moment before nodding. "That's the spirit!"
Introductions

Chapter by RealTerminal

Chapter Summary

"Birdie no!"

Upon leaving Port's forge, Glynda led Ilia back into town with Ruby and Pyrrha close behind. They were heading to Velvet's shop, but ran into a familiar face along the way. "Salutations!" Penny exclaimed. The automaton walked up to the group and bowed. The schoolchildren were close behind, and wasted no time in gawking at a creature they had never seen before. "I do not believe we have met." Penny addressed Ilia. "I am Penny."

Ilia was visibly unnerved by the robot, so Glynda spoke for her. "This is Ilia, my daughter. She'll be staying with me for the foreseeable future."

"It is an honor to meet you Ilia." Penny bowed. "I hope you enjoy your time here as much as I have." The automaton offered a smile, but Ilia still cowered behind her mother.

"Penny helps protect the village." Glynda explained to her daughter, gently nudging her forward. "Like you, she's only been here a short time."

"And I already feel right at home." Penny added.

"Hello...Penny." Ilia managed.

"Miss Glynda, how is Ilia your daughter?" One of the children asked. "She's a snake!"

"That's a good question, and for the record, Ilia is a lamia." Glynda responded, bending down to meet the children on their level. "I wanted to have children, so I laid some eggs, and when they hatched they were all snakey. Ilia's sisters live far away, but she's going to be staying with me for a while so I can teach her magic. Go on Ilia, say hi."

"Hi." Ilia hesitantly waved.

The children began asking questions, eagerly answered by Glynda. For her part, Ilia was extremely uncomfortable being the center of attention. She shifted herself to be partly shielded by her mother. The lamia looked to Pyrrha and Ruby, who offered reassuring smiles. That helped her feel a bit more at ease. At least the children were somewhat focused on Glynda now, not just on her.

A flash of movement in her peripheral vision caught Ilia's attention. A plump seagull flapped its way to a halt, landing just a few feet away. Scanning the ground for food, the bird waddled about, approaching the group. It apparently had no fear of humans, lamia or whatever Penny was. No one else even seemed to notice the bird, but Ilia was transfixed. Her hunting skills were frankly pathetic, but this prey was making things almost too easy. Ilia lunged at the bird. It was slow to react and she easily caught it. With one swift motion, she wrung its neck and lifted it to her face. Her jaw unhinged and cheeks stretched to accommodate the whole bird, which she hastily jammed into her mouth. Her throat bulged as her prey disappeared down her throat.
Ilia was suddenly aware of the silence. Her gaze darted about, and she noticed that once again all eyes were on her. The children looked on in terror. Even Pyrrha looked disturbed, shocked if not outright disgusted. Only Ruby and Penny seemed unperturbed, and Glynda still had her back to the lamia. Had she done something wrong?

"Birdie no!" One of the children cried. Glynda spun around to catch sight of the last of the bulge descend Ilia's neck. In an instant all the children were screaming and crying. Penny frantically tried to calm them, but her efforts were in vain.

The loud noises...the looks of terror...Ilia did not know what to do. So she fled, darting down the street as quickly as she could, heading for one of the only landmarks Glynda had pointed out to her. Hopefully there she could hide.

"Ilia wait!" Glynda called after her, but the lamia ignored the shout.

There were few things as annoying as an itch she could not scratch. Perhaps she was busy holding something she could not put down, or it was in an intimate area and she was surrounded by respectable individuals. Velvet did not care about that. Itches were natural, and comfort was paramount to enjoying life. People could think what they liked. She would run through the streets stark naked if it stopped this damned bloody itch plaguing her body.

Right now it was worst on her head, somewhere burrowed within her scalp, which by now was starting to hurt from how often she had scratched at it. It was maddening. If it were only there she would have been mostly fine, but itches had been cropping up in random spots all morning - her chest, her shins, forearms, and right above her ass. At least the last could be scratched with a quick bump against a table.

"Hey Hon." Coco's gentle voice suddenly crooned from behind her.

Velvet started with a jump. "Huh! Ah, hey Coco." She sighed, running her hands through her hair and looking up at the succubus behind her. "Sorry, was kinda'..."

"Frustrated?" Coco guessed, raising her own hands to thread through Velvet's hair. The girl felt the glamour fall, fingers turning to hard chitin, gently scraping across her scalp. "Still not gone huh?"

"You would know..." Velvet groaned, Coco's nails running across a particularly pleasant spot, then returning to focus upon it. "Gods Coco."

"I can do this for as long as you like Hon." Coco grinned, her claws trailing across every inch of Velvet's scalp, sending waves of relief through her body and soul. "Quite literally forever."

"You're evil." Velvet croaked, her hands clasping desperately in her lap, Coco's leering visage barely visible through her lidded gaze. The sight was beautiful.

Slam!

Velvet screamed at the sudden sound and flurry of movement, tumbling out of her chair and pressing herself against a cabinet door. Her skin felt numb, blood rushed to her ears, heart thrumming in her chest. She tried to breathe but found the ability stunted at the sight before her, a long brown tail slithering into her backroom. "W-what the fuck?!" She finally managed, sucking in a desperate breath. She glanced up at Coco, who seemed more amused than anything. "What the fuck was that?!"

"Big scared snake lady with bad fashion sense." Coco replied, blase, as if having her home invaded
by a foreign species was a common and expected occurrence. "You having fun down there?"

"Oh, I'm having a whale of a time!" Velvet snapped, accepting the hand Coco extended. "Why is there a lamia in my store?!"

"I'm terribly sorry Velvet, this is partially my fault." Came a familiar response, as Glynda strode through the door. Pyrrha and Ruby were just behind her. "As it happens we were intent on coming here next, so we're on schedule!"

Velvet fumbled for her chair, flopping into it with a long sigh, burying her face in her hands. Coco chuckled, patting Velvet unhelpfully on the back. "So the scared snake girl is yours I take it?"

"Quite literally in fact." Glynda confirmed. "Oh yes, Pyrrha, Ruby, meet Coco, Velvet's new companion." Coco gave a wave of her fingers.

Pyrrha seemed surprised for a moment, before returning the wave. Ruby was far more enthusiastic. "Heya, I'm Ruby!" She cheered.

"Gods, what an adorable little morsel. "Aw, you didn't tell me you were friends with a cutie like this." Coco nudged Velvet, who groaned in response.

"Well, if you'll excuse me, I will be back momentarily." Glynda headed into the backroom. It took a little time for the witch to locate her wayward daughter. Several steel racks had been tossed aside, their contents dragged into a pile beneath the stairs...the end of a brown tail poking out clear as day, twitching as Glynda approached. "Oh, my dear, you've had a trying day, haven't you?" She sighed, kneeling before the pile of coats and dresses, which shook at her voice, a small muffled whine coming from within. "I know Ilia. I'm sorry I didn't warn you...children are easily upset."

"They hate me too." The pile mumbled

Glynda chuckled, pulling away several garments. "They'll probably forget in a few days. Don't worry yourself over them." Shifting a shirt, Glynda was met with wide blue eyes and halted, smiling. "Sweetie, you're not in trouble, no harm will come to you."

"I wanna' go home." Ilia plead.

"Then we can, right away." Glynda nodded.

"But I can't, they don't want me..." Ilia sniffled.

Glynda stifled a wince at the sting in her heart. This was to be expected, but her haste and excitement had blinded her. It was too early to introduce Ilia to the town. The environment change had been too sudden, the expectations too different, her survival instinct had told her to flee. They were fortunate that was all they had told her. It was a somber reminder that Ilia was not human. As close to her as she may seem, Ilia was an alien in this environment, and needed far more education, far more care to be taken in her integration.

"I am sorry dear, I know this is a difficult experience." Glynda sighed, edging closer to Ilia's eyes. "I know it's frightening. This is a whole new world to take in, and I have poorly prepared you for it, but it will get better, I promise you." Slipping a hand into the pile, Glynda searched for Ilia's shoulder, smiling gently as the scaled skin came into contact.

"I broke the room." Ilia slumped.

Glynda chuckled, brushing aside the garments covering her daughter's head and nuzzling the girl
affectionately. "Don't worry. Let me show you what you'll be capable of someday."

Offering her hand, Glynda pulled Ilia upward, the lamia slithering gracefully from her cover. It was a sight Glynda would never tire of seeing. Long gone were the twitchy, clumsy crawlings of an infant serpent, her daughter was becoming a woman, and it would never cease to pain her how much of her life she had missed. How much of all their lives she had missed. But now she got to behold another truly wonderful sight, a genuine look of awe as with a single wave of her hands, Glynda willed the room to reset itself. The racks stood themselves upright, the many garments returning to their hangers, as if given lives of their own and the singular desire to achieve order.

Ilia giggled, and Glynda found herself falling in love all over again, observing her daughter's joyful expression as she looked from the now tidied room to her own hands, which curled loosely against her stomach after a moment of consideration. "I won't disappoint you." Ilia promised.

Glynda pulled her daughter into an embrace, planting a kiss upon her hair. "You never have."

"Velvet, Coco, meet Ilia, my daughter." Glynda stood proudly by the lamia's side. Ilia struggled to stay still, hands clenched in her lap as she weathered two new stares.

Coco pulled her glasses down, running her gaze over the lamia in an appraising manner. Glynda felt a twinge of protectiveness. Succubi were unpredictable at the best of times, and Coco was not truly bound. Velvet, on the other hand, seemed...shocked, to say the least. This was not altogether surprising. The implications were likely dawning on her. Lamia were not exactly unknown amongst common folk. Depending upon the location, they were considered a danger of which children needed to be educated, particularly maturing maidens between the ages of seventeen and twenty five. Velvet simply stared, mouth hanging open in a silent exclamation.

Ilia gave a nervous little wave. "Hi?" Gods she was adorable.

"I have a new challenge for you Velvet, when you collect your jaw." Glynda teased, stifling a chuckle when the shell shocked girl shook free of her funk.

"Uh, hi, Ilia, it's nice to meet you...now...sorry this is just…" Velvet rambled.

"Believe me Velvet, I understand how you feel." Pyrrha chimed in sympathetically. Velvet shot her a grateful look.

"What challenge?" Velvet asked curiously.

Glynda lay a hand upon her daughter's shoulder. "Ilia needs clothes."

"Clothes?" Velvet questioned, a bemused look crossing her face. "Well...I may be able to help…" She stood, faltering a little as the reality of the situation resettled. "I uh, don't know if there's anything specific you want here."

"Ilia is identical in proportion to most humans from the waist up, though quite a bit slighter than the rest of us, for the time being that is." Glynda explained. "Clothing will need to grow with her, as she has entered maturity."

"By how much?" Velvet inquired.

"Roughly double in circumference." Glynda answered. "Fully grown, Ilia will be larger than myself."
"Easily done, uh, any preferences?" Velvet asked. "Style, or…" She shook her hands vaguely in Ilia's direction. Ilia quirked her head in question, looking to Glynda.

"Did you see anything you liked in there sweetie?" Glynda asked, waving toward the backroom. Ilia stared blankly for a moment, before suddenly twisting around and slithering back into the room.

"Uh, what was she doing back there?" Velvet questioned.

"Hiding." Glynda replied. "She scared the children, and they scared her."

"But why here?" Velvet asked, baffled.

"We were outside, and I did tell her we planned to visit...so I apologize for the fright." Glynda offered a slightly weary grin, just as the sound of slithering scales prompted Ilia's return, this time with a bundle of black and white cloth, which she unfurled to lay over her body. A maid outfit.

"Oh, that's..." Glynda started.

"A work in progress..." Velvet blurted as Coco snickered beside her. "But I do plan on making more... gods this is a weird discussion. Is there anything else I can do?"

"We will take three sweaters, two head warmers and a pair of mittens please." Glynda requested.

_That smile was too bright for a woman like Glynda_, Velvet thought.

Winter rarely spent time alone with Blake. Really, no one spent much alone time with Blake, aside from Glynda. Still, given the option, Winter would have preferred to keep it that way. She had never quite been able to bring herself to trust Blake. It was not just the snide remarks and sarcasm, it was Blake's history too. The aspect had not always been so friendly. Well, friendly was the wrong word. Not openly and murderously hostile was probably a better descriptor.

Blake had once been bound to another, and her old master had not been nearly as philanthropic as Glynda. The aspect had killed dozens of humans, and the tally Winter was aware of only included Templars. It was hard to be sure how large her body count had truly been, as she was not in the habit of leaving bodies behind. It had taken a massive strike force, led by General Ironwood himself, and assisted by Glynda, to take Blake down. That might have been the end of her story. Ironwood had insisted on the aspect's annihilation. Instead Glynda set her free, and Blake had pledged herself to the witch in return...after she slaughtered her old master.

Ironwood had always considered Glynda's decision a foolish one, and Winter was inclined to agree. Sure, Blake was nice enough now, but she had the capability to wreak untold havoc if she so chose. Winter was not expecting this to happen, nor would she currently call for Blake's destruction, but she would not entirely let her guard down either. Then again, even if Blake had always been kindly and helpful, the Templar in Winter would not have allowed complete trust. She had been trained to mistrust all that was not human, and though she had gone a long way toward breaking that prejudice thanks to Glynda's help, it never fully subsided, always tugging at the edges of her mind.

Today Blake seemed kinder than usual, even if she was in a noticeably irritated mood. When Winter had arrived at the house, expecting to find Glynda, the aspect had invited her in for tea. It seemed a love for the beverage was one thing the pair had in common, and it was just as well. It was a long trek from Winter's home in the mountains to the village, and she had been dragging along a large suitcase of her possessions besides. Magic helped, but she was tired and thirsty all the same.
"So why is Glynda in town?" Winter asked, placing her mug on a coaster. She sat in an armchair, across the coffee table from Blake, who reclined on the sofa. "And why aren't you with her?"

"She's showing off her daughter." Blake rolled her eyes. Not the answer Winter was expecting. "I'm opposed to the idea of her being here, so I decided to stay away to avoid any unpleasantness."

"I didn't know Glynda had a daughter." Winter noted.

"Not many people do." Blake chuckled. "And strictly speaking she...well, it's a complex situation, and I would rather not have anything to do with it."

"What's her daughter like?" Winter asked. "How old is she? Who's the father?"

Blake smirked, just the way she did after making one of her snide remarks. "I'm sure you'll meet her soon enough." She gestured toward the door. "They're on their way back."

"Come on now, won't you tell me anything?" Winter insisted.

"You know I won't." Blake grinned. "Now drink your tea before it gets cold."

Winter snapped her fingers and a flame appeared just above her hand. "I don't think that will be an issue." Still, she knew better than to bother pressing the aspect for answers. Winter was stubborn, but Blake was stubborn in the way only an immortal creature of immense power could be.

Fortunately, Winter did not have long to wait. After a few minutes, the door swung open, seemingly of its own accord, and Glynda walked in, accompanied by the sound of footfalls and an odd shuffling. Glynda stopped at the doorway to the lounge room. "Ah, Winter, I was not expecting you for another day or two."

"I was eager to get back to my sister." Winter explained, standing to greet the witch. "Unfortunately she's currently sleeping."

"I had been planning to visit Weiss today, but circumstances led me to alter my plans." Glynda said.

"Blake tells me..." Winter started. Just then a new figure slid into view, short and slighter than even her sister...and sporting a snake's tail...a lamia? Winter's mouth hung open as the creature stared at her wide-eyed. The bright blue of the creatures gaze captured her attention. She did not even notice how nervous the lamia looked.

Glynda chuckled, no doubt amused by the usually unflappable Winter's speechlessness. "This is my daughter, Ilia. Ilia, meet Winter. She's a good friend of mine."

"Hi." Ilia waved.

"H-hello." Winter stuttered in response.

The lamia tugged at Glynda's sleeve. "Can I go back to my nest?"

Glynda looked down at her daughter and smiled. "Yes, of course dear." She approved, planting a kiss on her forehead.

Ilia breathed a sigh of relief and hurried up the stairs. "Ruby and I shall assist her." Pyrrha said, hidden from Winter's view. In a flash of crimson, they too rushed up the stairs.

"So...your daughter...is a lamia?" Winter managed. She glanced at Blake to find her looking on
with smug satisfaction.

Glynda circled the couch and took a seat beside Blake. "Yes, I carried Ilia and her sisters."

"Sisters?" Winter questioned.

"Yes, but they're not here." Glynda nodded. "Ilia developed an affinity for magic, so I brought her here to train her."

"How many sisters?" Winter asked, still stunned.

"Three, though there were seven eggs in total." Glynda replied. Winter looked down at Glynda's belly, then back up. The witch laughed. "I suppose you'd like to know more?"

"Well I am certainly curious." Winter confirmed.

"I'm happy to answer any questions, but I believe this will be of more use to you." Glynda waved her hand toward the nearby bookshelf and a pair of tomes floated free, levitating their way to the table before Winter. "I wrote a book about my experiences, and took copious notes besides." She smiled. "I have several copies of the book, but the notes are irreplaceable, so I must insist they remain here."

"When Blake told me you had a daughter, I was not expecting anything remotely like this." Winter admitted.

"It seems everyone has the same reaction." Glynda observed. "Though this is hardly surprising."

"There's...so much I want to ask." Winter shook her head, still struggling to believe the situation was real. "Would you mind?"

"Not at all." Glynda replied. "Ask me anything."
Pyrrha had to admit, the day had been an oddity...not that this was very surprising of course. It was not often that a person would stroll into town with her accidental summon, witch mentor and that mentor's newly revealed lamia daughter. Frankly, Pyrrha found the sheer absurdity of the mental phrasing refreshing. She preferred absurd to tragic or painful. Absurd was amusing and harmless...usually. The only victims today had been a tree, a bird, the innocence of several children, and Velvet's nervous heart. Pyrrha considered that a win, apart from the sickening visage of an entire bird squeezing down Ilia's throat. That was going to stay with her.

Still, as shocking as it had been, Pyrrha could not really blame the poor girl. She was only acting as her nature demanded. Prey presented itself and she pounced. After the understandably frustrating morning it must have been incredibly satisfying to capture such a large bird. Yes, it was disturbing to witness, but the brief moment of pride on Ilia's face was really quite adorable. Then the screaming started and it all went to hell.

Now Pyrrha followed a rather forlorn lamia to her makeshift nest, in hopes that perhaps she could help cheer her up. The new clothes - a few garments Velvet had in stock that fit Ilia - had perked her up for a time, but the journey home had been quiet, and Ilia's shoulders had steadily fallen.

"Are you comfortable having us in your nest Ilia?" Pyrrha asked, standing in the doorway. "We don't mean to intrude. We will respect your privacy."

The lamia shrugged, her ponytail waving gently as she slowly spun around to face her guests. Ruby entered the room first, taking in the surroundings with her usual glee. The attic had never found much use. Anything of value was kept in the basement, where Glynda's pocket real spells protected anything of even the barest value. The only things that needed moving were a few odd bits of furniture and a few years of dust. Now the room was beginning to resemble something livable. The large mattress was covered in half a dozen odd blankets, mismatched and clashing, yet seemingly comfortable. Lumps beneath them indicated where pillows had found themselves, creating a roughly lamia-shaped indentation.

"It's so cozy in here!" Ruby admired. "I kinda' like the smaller space, and all the blankets!" Ilia smiled, nodding her head as she picked up another blanket from beside the bed, shaking it until it unfurled.

"Is there anything else we can do to help?" Pyrrha offered. She approached Ruby from behind, resting her hands upon the summon's shoulders.

Ilia hesitated, looking from the blankets in her hands to the guests within her nest. She bit her lip. It was adorable. "My home...my nest was a cave. Roots grew through the stone, from thick, old trees. This wood is too orderly. I would like to cover it with this cloth, but I do not know how."
"We can tack them to the beams quite easily." Pyrrha suggested. "Ruby-

"On it!" Ruby squeaked, scrambling to obey.

"And the spare blankets from the closet please!" Pyrrha called after her, the light footsteps fading down the stairs. She chuckled helplessly to herself. Ruby's boundless enthusiasm would never cease to take her off guard.

"Thank you, Sister." Ilia bowed her head respectfully.

Pyrrha blinked. Sister? Well, she supposed in a certain way they were sisters, in the sense that Weiss was her battle sister and Velvet was a sister of Glynda's care. It was a bit of a stretch. There was a certain matriarchal sense to Glynda, in a way that would put many Mistrali matrons to shame, but it did not feel right to consider her a surrogate mother. Pyrrha had not earned that right.

"You are welcome Ilia." Pyrrha replied. It did make sense in a way. Ilia called others by labels, and she was sister. She would act the part. "I apologize for my initial reaction. I have never met a lamia in person, and combined with the revelation…" She sighed, half laughing. "Our lives are rather eventful, and that such a thing occurred shouldn't have phased me, yet it did."

Ilia smiled briefly, slithering toward Pyrrha until they were close enough that she could make out the tiny scales that covered the lamia's upper body. It was really quite fascinating. She seemed so frail, so delicate, yet the diagrams of her mother indicated that Ilia would grow far thicker scales in places as she matured. This seemingly innocent girl would one day find herself capable of tearing Grimm limb from limb in protection of her young.

"Mother taught us that humans will never like us." Ilia began, slitted blue eyes downcast. "We view them as vessels, to carry our young, to give life, but mama is more. She gave us love. If she can love us, why not others?"

The way Ilia's lip quivered broke Pyrrha's heart. The young lamia tried to smile once more. This was no monster. This was a poor girl raised to fear the world, suddenly thrust into it headfirst. It was a wonder she had not set more on fire. Pyrrha had certainly been rather volatile as an adolescent, and she was calmer than most. Ilia needed reassurance. She needed her support. After a moment of thought, she offered her hands, alongside a far more genuine smile of her own. Ilia stared at the limbs, then to Pyrrha's face in trepidation.

"Humans are stubborn creatures Ilia." Pyrrha noted. "We fear what we do not understand, and understand so little of this world." She flexed her fingers gently, the motion drawing the lamia's gaze once more. Ilia dropped the sheet she had been carrying and slowly extended her own arms, as if afraid Pyrrha may bite, until finally making contact. Her skin was an odd texture, not exactly rough, nor smooth. Each tiny scale was felt, but not in an unpleasant way. Her nails were even similar to a human's, if thicker and pointed. "Give us time, to learn and understand...and perhaps don't eat in front of the children next time."

Pyrrha had to restrain her forced chuckle from turning into a genuine one as Ilia produced an exaggerated pout. Gods, she was almost as adorable as Ruby. Who was close by, if the sounds of pattering feet were any indications.

"I found more blankets!" Ruby announced.

Pyrrha could not resist another laugh. "Of course she did."

Just five minutes Blake, five minutes will mean the world to her.
Blake damned her lover's care and reason. It made her soft. A few decades prior and she would have dismissed her effortlessly, but Blake was not unaffected by Glynda's experiences. She had watched her change before her very eyes, from a knowledge hungry adventuress, to a mother deprived of motherhood...and every consequence that followed. Now she reveled in the opportunity to make up for lost time, and it was a clumsy spectacle to say the least.

Glynda was a powerful witch, the only human to ever face Blake and come out victorious. Her drive for knowledge was admirable, her integrity inspiring, and her love for life and all it encompassed...beautiful. But at times it was so very blinding. Blake had been opposed to the original experiment - too dangerous, too risky, too many unchecked variables - but when the witch got a bright idea in her head there was no true reasoning with her. Now here they were, nearing two decades later, and a very starved mother was bumbling into rearing a child far later in her life-cycle than nature intended, nearly scarring her in the process.

There were good reasons Blake kept her distance, numerous and varying in complexity. The most simple was that Ilia was a lamia, a creature born of humanity violating nature, and subsequently set loose in the wilds to live or die on its own terms. Were it not for the requirements for their reproduction, they might have continued to exist in harmony until the end of time, but adaptation had seen them form a harsh symbiosis with their progenitors. It was an irony Blake did not miss.

At the very least Blake could admit there was little choice in the matter. Unchecked, Ilia's magical ability would likely end in disaster, and Glynda could never have abandoned a creature in need, least of all the product of her womb. After all, they were the only she would ever carry, such was the price of power.

Blake protected them with her all, not that there was much in the way of threats during the incubation. And Patch was a relatively safe island, so unless Ilia ventured deeper into its forests, she needed no protection now. Even so, Blake knew where the juvenile was at all times. She knew what she felt, why she felt it. It was the same connection she shared with Glynda, though not nearly so strong and clear. Proximity had strengthened the bond, and confirmed Blake's fears. Ilia shared her essence in a way her siblings did not.

Blake had hoped the bond would never flourish in this manner, that she was simply an anomaly, that Ilia would mature, leave her nest and live out her life as normal as the next. The flares of essence suggested otherwise, and left Blake deeply conflicted. She cared little for the young beyond their value to Glynda, but even she could not deny the draw of Ilia's affection. She was innocent and frightened, and all Glynda asked was five minutes of attention to soothe her soul. It was too reasonable a request to deny.

The aspect did not bother opening the door. This home was her domain, its shadows channeled her essence, and Ilia kept her room quite dim. A single lantern in the corner illuminated the tent-like appearance of the room. Ruby and Pyrrha had done well. It was a synthetic facsimile of the original den, and Ilia seemed content to doze within, curled lazily in the heart of her new nest. She flinched as Blake allowed her form to become corporeal.

"Ilia." Blake murmured.

Ilia slithered from the bed, a small, nervous smile adorning her face as she presented herself to Blake. She had always tried to inspire pride in the aspect, but had never truly known how. It was not about pride for Blake. She expected nothing more than what others were capable of accomplishing. All Blake wanted was for those she cared about to be happy and safe.

"Bond Mother." Ilia greeted with a respectful bow.
Ah yes, Bond Mother, bonded to Glynda, Womb Mother, mated by her true mother. Labeling became confusing when three individuals served similar roles in her life, but Blake had no interest in altering Ilia's mannerisms, no more than Glynda had. "Are you comfortable here?"

Ilia nodded rapidly, blue eyes flicking to the tented roof above. "Sister and Rose are very kind. Mama bought me some new clothes."

"Rose?" Blake raised a brow in question. "Ruby?"

"Mama told me she is like you, is she not?" Ilia questioned in turn. Blake nodded in affirmation. "Her scent is complex, but rose is strongest within."

"We do not know where she came from, however her purpose seems to be a rite of passage." Blake explained. "She is exceptionally kind to all."

"I like her." Ilia declared. "Her scent reminds me of home."

Blake hummed, taking a step closer to the nervous lamia. She noticed a small bruise flaring on her cheek. "How did this happen?" She asked, reaching up to lightly brush against the blemish.

Ilia nuzzled toward Blake's hand, though only slightly, her features tinting a darker tan. "I was trying to hunt...I'm still not good at it." Her shoulders slumped. "And then I get angry, and fire happens!" She growled in frustration, before pouting. "I hurt another tree today."

"Trees grow back." Blake observed.

"I will anger Mother Nature!" Ilia exclaimed.

"The spriggans will behave themselves." Blake scoffed.

"But I harm their home!" Ilia insisted.

"Through no intent of your own." Blake soothed. "You are a novice, struggling with power you do not yet understand."

"What if I hurt someone nice?" Ilia persisted. "What if I hurt Sister? Or Mama?"

"Pyrrha is a trained warrior." Blake noted. "In time she will be as powerful as Glynda, whom you could not hurt if you tried." Blake cupped Ilia's face, gently angling the lamia's wide blue eyes into her own. "The only danger you pose is to yourself. In time that will pass, like all ailments."

"Will you help me too?" Ilia whispered, tense.

"I will do what I must." Blake assured, letting her hands fall. "Rest, Ilia. And do not concern yourself with the bumbling of humans. They will adapt to your existence."

"I will try." Ilia promised.

With a final *humph*, Blake allowed herself to dissipate, the shadows swallowing her form. She tried to ignore the way Ilia shrunk at her exit, but she could not ignore the way her eyes stared right at her, as if perfectly tracking her essence. It was discomforting.

Glynda, Ilia and Blake had departed, heading into town to receive Port's gift and get Ilia properly measured for clothes by Velvet. Those in her care were doing rather well. Dew was physically healthy and Ren was only dealing with the odd cough, though Nora's sight had still yet to return.
Even so, that meant they needed little attention. That just left Pyrrha and Ruby with some chores, all easily completed by the summon.

Pyrrha decided to catch up on her witch training. Ever since Ren and Nora had come into her care, she had been neglecting her studies in favor of caring for them. She was expecting Glynda to admonish her for this any day now, but the Master Witch had been just as busy lately. No matter, it was better to just get it done. Pyrrha was more than capable of catching up if she put her mind to it. After a quiet day or two, perhaps an all-nighter, she would be back on track.

As Pyrrha conjured balls of flame and frost, energy and void, it seemed her command over the elements had not atrophied. She had chosen the basement as the site of her practice, a safe space devoid of valuables to damage, and separated from the rest of the house by a barrier. Sprites were summoned and dispelled. She created targets from elemental essence and annihilated them with their opposites. That had been a solid warm-up, now she was ready to make some progress.

"Pyrrha!" Ruby called, drawing the apprentice witch's attention away from her spellbook.
"Someone's at the door!"

Pyrrha sighed, marked her page, and closed the book, placing it on a nearby table. "I'll be right up!" She cast one last spell to suppress any magical energy left over from practice, then jogged up the stairs, meeting Ruby beside the front door. She opened it to find a rather tired and nervous-looking man with a bow slung over his shoulder. "Can I help you?"

"Yes-um...I saw...that is I-" The man stammered. He took a deep breath. "I was hunting just east of here, maybe half a mile away, I spotted some Beowolves."

"How many?" Pyrrha asked.

"Uh...maybe five?" The man replied. "Sorry, I ran at first sight of them. There could be more."

"It's alright, I'll handle it." Pyrrha offered a reassuring smile. "Thank you for bringing this to my attention. You may come in to rest if you'd like."

"No, that's alright." The man refused. "I'm just gonna' go home...have a drink." He turned and headed down the path leading from the house.

Pyrrha closed the door. "Ruby, could you get my armor out?" She requested, turning to the summon. "I'll get my weapons."

"Shouldn't we go get Weiss...well maybe just Yang since it's daytime but-" Ruby suggested.

"There's no time." Pyrrha shook her head. "There are farms in that area that would be under threat if we wait."

"Well, maybe we should take Ren at least." Ruby advised. "Isn't it dangerous to fight Grimm alone?"

"I'm not going to risk setting back his recovery." Pyrrha declined. "I'm more than capable of handling half a dozen Beowolves."

"At least let me go with you." Ruby insisted.

"Fair enough." Pyrrha allowed. That seemed good enough for Ruby. She smiled before heading up to Pyrrha's room to fetch her armor.
Pyrrha headed for the hallway closet, opening it to reveal a collection of weapons. It was an odd place for an armory, but ideal for quick deployment. Pyrrha's spear and shield leaned against the wall just inside. The newly refaced shield brilliantly reflected her visage. She put it down, leaning it against her leg so she could examine her blade - razor sharp. Pyrrha did love training as a witch, she loved magic, and she loved caring for those in need. Still, she never lost the desire to fight, to defend the weak by force of arms. There was something uniquely exhilarating about it, something almost spiritual. There had been many times when she regretted putting her weapons aside. It was good to get the opportunity to be a Huntress, even if only for an afternoon.

"Here's your armor!" Ruby cheered as she clunked down the stairs, awkwardly carrying the panoply. Pyrrha could not help but smile.

Tracking down the Grimm did not prove difficult. A small group of them had congregated in a snowy field. Pyrrha and Ruby crouched at the edge of the clearing as the former planned her attack. There were more Beowolves than expected, but nothing she could not handle, eight plus one Alpha. The Alpha might be a threat, but only if she got careless. If she did this correctly, she could kill all the normal Beowolves, most before they even reacted, then take on the Alpha solo. The creature was huge, powerful and fast, the slashes of its claws more than strong enough to go right through her armor and the magical barrier that Pyrrha had cast around herself, but she was faster and, most importantly, smarter.

"Wait here." Pyrrha whispered. Ruby nodded in confirmation.

Pyrrha moved along the edge of the field, staying quiet and hidden, stalking the Beowolves. Once in position, she just had to wait for the right moment. The Alpha looked away, clawing at the ground at the edge of the clearing, perhaps going after a small animal. Whatever the cause of the distraction, it made for a perfect opening. She burst from the bushes, spearing a Beowolf through the neck with her spear before it even knew it was being attacked. Pyrrha spun, pulling the weapon free and simultaneously throwing her shield, which slammed into the head of another Grimm, knocking it senseless. One of the monsters charged her, only to be met with a stab to the chest as she used telekinesis to retrieve her shield.

Pyrrha shoved the mortally wounded Beowolf away and turned to face another. She ducked as it slashed for her head, missing by a wide margin, then thrust her spear up through its chin. She left the weapon in the beast as it fell, bashing another Grimm in the face with her shield. It fell to the ground, stunned, and Pyrrha finished it off by crushing its skull with another slam. Another rushed at her, and she dipped down, slamming her shoulder into the charging monster's gut. It tumbled back, giving her enough time to retrieve her spear to stab through its mouth. The first Beowolf she had struck with her shield now stirred, but she punctured its chest before it could get to its feet.

The three remaining normal Beowolves charged at Pyrrha simultaneously. She leapt back, allowing two to collide, then thrust forward, spearing both with the same attack. She let them fall, along with her spear, as the other recovered from its abortive assault to attack again. Pyrrha dodged to the side as it lunged at her, kicking it in the leg to take it to the ground. She slammed the edge of her shield down onto the back of the Grimm's neck, ending its life.

Now only the Alpha remained, and it was quickly upon Pyrrha with a roar. She leapt backwards, avoiding its strike, before diving into a roll that took her behind it. She wrenched her spear from the pair of dead Beowolves before jumping back again, as the Alpha spun around and swiped at her. The Grimm roared in frustration, reared back, then charged. Pyrrha effortlessly rolled out of the way.

Some battles were brutal and straightforward, a head-on clash of steel and will. Some battles were
pure chaos, danger from all sides and death around every corner. This battle was different. It was more like a dance, every motion precise and not a step wasted. Pyrrha lived for this. It was her art, proof that there was beauty, even in destruction and death. But all good things must end. She was at the Alpha's back, and one stab to its spine, between the bony plates, would bring it down. Pyrrha brought her spear back, transferring her weight to her back foot before shifting to the front.

The ground fell out from under Pyrrha as her boot sunk into a hole hidden by the snow. She fell to a knee as her spear harmlessly deflected off one of the solid white plates on the Alpha's back. The creature spun around, swinging its huge, razor-sharp claw. It was surely the end. Time seemed to slow as the beast's claw arced toward her face. She knew it was over, and felt nothing but regret. Was this what Jaune felt? She waited for death, hoping against hope that it would be clean and painless.

There was a flash of red and the Alpha's severed arm sailed past Pyrrha's head, missing by inches. Ruby held a scythe of her own blood, tendrils leading from the weapon back to her wrists. The Grimm roared in agony, clutching at the stump of its missing limb, but Ruby did not let up. With an underhand slash, she sliced the monster in two from hip to shoulder. The two halves fell to the snow, staining it with crimson. Ruby took a few deep breaths, then her scythe dissolved into twin streams of blood that were sucked back into the summon's wrists. Pyrrha could do nothing but stare up in shock.

"Are you okay?!" Ruby implored, kneeling before her mistress, a look of fear clouding her face.

"I-I'm fine." Pyrrha stammered.

"Thank the gods!" Ruby exclaimed. She grabbed the sides of Pyrrha's face and planted a kiss on her lips before pulling back.

The world muffled, white noise clouding Pyrrha's senses as shock and confusion reigned supreme. Had Ruby just kissed her? It was not the first time, but that was on the cheek...as Ruby went to play bait. No one had ever kissed her on the lips before.

"I was so worried!" Ruby's voice snapped Pyrrha back to reality.

"I know Ruby...I'm sorry." Pyrrha apologized as she stared into wide silver eyes, glowing in the sunlight.

"It's alright, I'm just happy you're okay." Ruby stood, offering her hand to help Pyrrha up.

Pyrrha accepted the assist, allowing Ruby to pull her to her feet. "Thank you for saving me."

"Are you injured?" Ruby asked. "Do you need me to heal you?"

"No...I just tripped." Pyrrha replied. She took a deep breath and sighed. "Let's just go home."
Ilia was thankful that the trip into town had not included any encounters with strangers. After the previous day, she had lost pretty much all interest in meeting new people. Having Blake along this time did add an extra sense of security for Ilia, but it was better not to deal with the issue altogether. When they reached Velvet's shop, the seamstress still acted somewhat nervous around the lamia, almost afraid to touch Ilia as she took her measurements. This was a project Ilia was actually interested in. Clothes fascinated her, along with many human oddities, and she looked forward to having more clothes of her own.

It was somewhat disappointing to leave Velvet's shop empty-handed, though Glynda explained to Ilia that making custom clothing for her would take quite some time. Once done, however, the resulting attire would be a more comfortable fit. Not that Ilia found her current clothes uncomfortable. She reasoned that perhaps she did not fully understand what it meant for clothes to be comfortable, having never worn them before. Hers did seem to move around a lot, at least compared to what she saw others wearing.

As the group passed a shop, Ilia noticed something odd displayed in the window. It looked like a tiny human, fashioned from cloth and wearing equally tiny clothes, with facial features sewn into place. "What's that?" She asked, pointing to the object.

"That's a doll." Glynda replied.

"What's it for?" Ilia inquired. "Is it used for magic?"

"Not usually, though some spells...that's not important." Glynda answered. "It's a toy, an item of amusement, for children."

"I don't understand." Ilia admitted.

"How can I explain this…” Glynda scratched her head in thought. Blake looked on with a smirk, she was Glynda's difficulty. "Toys are often used to play out fantasies. A doll would allow a child to pretend to have a child of her own to pretend to take care of, or might act as an imaginary companion to help stave off loneliness or fear."

"Oh, okay." Ilia nodded, looking curiously at the doll. It was strange that something so simple could have such diverse meaning ascribed to it.

"Do you want one?" Glynda asked.

"Well...is there one like me?" Ilia questioned.
"Hmm...I doubt there would be any lamia dolls on sale, but I could make one if you want." Glynda offered.

"I think I'd like that." Ilia nodded. Perhaps it would help her feel more human, or at least provide some comfort.

The other destination for the day's excursion was Port's forge, only a short distance from the toy shop. Uncharacteristically, the blacksmith was not working when the group arrived, instead pacing back and forth behind his counter. His attention snapped to the door as soon as it opened. "Ilia! Glynda! Oh, you've brought Blake too! I've been waiting all morning for you."

"It's not like you to be so impatient." Glynda observed.

"It's not every day I have a hand-crafted gift for my niece." Port noted. "Come, come." He gestured for the group to approach. Glynda and Ilia did so, Blake remaining a ways back, leaning against the wall by the door. Port reached under the counter to grab a sizeable box, which he placed atop it. "Here you go!"

Ilia looked at the box, then to her mother. "Go ahead, open it." Glynda encouraged.

Ilia lifted the lid, revealing a length of coiled leather with a wooden handle at one end. It reminded her a bit of her tail. "Um...thank you for the gift." Glynda had helpfully coached her on how to respond to receiving a gift. She paused. "What is it?"

"It's a bullwhip!" Port exclaimed. "I spent all night braiding it. I only wish there was more room in here so you could try it out, but I'm sure Blake could instruct you on its use once you get home."

Blake rolled her eyes and nodded in silent, if reluctant, agreement.

"Why a whip?" Glynda asked.

"It's a weapon that can help her hunt, with minimal risk of self injury while she learns to master it." Port replied. "Plus Ela, the lamia I was acquainted with, used one. On our patrol, when we sat down for lunch, I ate some bread I'd brought along with me. She got out her whip, waited at the edge of the forest, and used it to strike a rabbit, a perfect hit, right to the head. It knocked the little thing out cold. Then she snapped it up and ate it. I wish I hadn't seen the last part, but her skill with the weapon was a sight to behold!"

"It's a fine gift, thank you Peter." Glynda smiled. "We should find a safe place to practice with it...and perhaps I should make some safety glasses just in case."

"Not a bad idea." Port agreed. "You can never be too careful. But once you master it, I can fashion blades to tie into it that will make it even more fearsome!"

"I don't think that will be necessary, but thank you for the offer." Glynda declined. There was no way she would give her daughter something that hazardous, but that was just Port's MO, taking something dangerous and making it even more dangerous. It was part of his charm.

Pyrrha sat at the kitchen table, holding a mug of coffee in both hands. It had been a largely silent journey home, and once there the silence had continued as she stripped off her armor, replacing it with comfortable sweats, and sat down at the table. Ruby had asked if she wanted coffee, and Pyrrha had nodded in agreement, though the nausea she felt made it questionable whether or not she would be able to keep anything down. As it happened she sat with the mug, not really drinking, just staring off into space.
"Are you okay?" Ruby asked. She got no response. "Pyrrha, are you okay?"

"Oh, sorry..." Pyrrha snapped back to reality. "No, I'm not."

"Can I help?" Ruby offered.

"I...don't think so." Pyrrha sighed. "I just...need some time."

Ruby was visibly disappointed, but did not ask any further questions. Pyrrha was relieved, as she had enough unanswered questions of her own bouncing around in her head. Foremost among them, what has she even been doing out there? She was surrounded by aspects of unimaginable power, resided in a Master Witch's home which was shared with two werewolves - one healthy - and was friends with a vampire. All of them were better suited to fighting off those Grimm. She was thoroughly human, mortal. If the strike that would have killed her hit Weiss, she would have been able to laugh it off. If it hit Blake, well, Blake could just turn immaterial to avoid the hit.

Pyrrha had always wanted to be a warrior, to protect people. It had given her purpose. Now it seemed quite clear that she had no business being a Huntress, not here, not now. For all the thrill of combat, the risk of death was far too much, particularly when someone else could do the job with no risk at all. Even her method of combat was borderline suicidal. If she used a gun or a bow at least she could attack from out of her enemy's range. Getting up close was madness and totally unnecessary.

What would happen if Pyrrha died? She would be gone, but her friends would still remain, forced to suffer the pain of her loss. Would that pain destroy them as it had nearly destroyed her? Would it drive them to the foolish lengths to which she had gone? She was not helping people, she was setting up to hurt them, even if indirectly. Was she being selfish, or was she just a fool? Perhaps both? The answers did not come easy. They did not come at all. She had escaped death by the narrowest of margins, and was left only with doubts and regret.

Pyrrha just noticed movement in the corner of her vision. She turned to see Ruby waving at her, holding another mug of coffee. "I made you a fresh cup since yours is kinda' old now."

Pyrrha looked down at the mug she held. No steam rose from the surface of the brown liquid. No heat radiated into her hands. She quickly dipped her thumb inside and found the coffee cold. "Oh...sorry."

"You don't have to apologize." Ruby shook her head. She replaced Pyrrha's coffee with a fresh, steaming cup. "Did I make it wrong the first time or something?"

"No, I just...I don't know." Pyrrha frowned. "It's not you, or the coffee, I've just...got a lot on my mind."

"Do you wanna' talk about it?" Ruby asked.

Pyrrha slumped in her chair. "I don't want to burden you. I'm not sure it would help anyway."

"It's no burden." Ruby insisted.

Pyrrha took a deep breath, tilting her head back to look at the ceiling. "Maybe later." She secretly hoped Ruby would forget about the whole thing, but she knew for a fact the aspect would not.

Ilia was eager to try out the whip. One the way home, she had confirmed to Glynda that she had never used a weapon of any kind before. The witch was annoyed at the revelation. She had left
Cillia with several weapons to help her defend their young, instructing her in their use and suggesting she likewise instruct the children. Apparently she had done away with them as soon as Glynda had departed. But no matter, weapons were another aspect of human life that was alien and fascinating to Ilia.

Not surprisingly, Ilia wanted to start learning to use her whip immediately. With some hesitation, Blake had agreed to begin teaching her as soon as they arrived home. Glynda was more than happy to let them. Sure, she was not thrilled by the prospect of her daughter wielding a weapon, but the girl was so excited. Given Ilia's general mood since her arrival on Patch, Glynda was loathe to deny her anything that brought her joy. If practicing with a whip made her happy, so be it. At least it was less dangerous than a sword.

Despite the minimal risk of injury, Glynda decided it would be wise to prepare some lamia-safe medicinal potions and salves, just in case. Learning to properly use a weapon was difficult, and a whip was quite challenging. Until Ilia got the hang of it, she would be more of a danger to herself than any animal she might target. There were sure to be bruises, maybe a few cuts. Better to be safe than sorry. To that end, Glynda headed into the house, leaving Ilia and Blake to practice outside.

Upon reaching the kitchen, Glynda's initial purpose was immediately forgotten. There she found Pyrrha, sitting at the table, thousand-yard stare on her face. A nervous Ruby stood nearby, appearing unsure of what to do. Something was obviously very wrong. She would have to take charge. "Ruby, if you'll excuse us." She requested.

"Do you want anything before-" Ruby started.

"No, that's alright." Glynda interrupted. Ruby nodded and rushed out of the room, and Glynda took a seat at the table across from Pyrrha. "What happened?"

"I almost died." Pyrrha replied matter-of-factly. "I should have died."

"And how did that happen?" Glynda inquired.

"A man reported Grimm nearby." Pyrrha explained. "I went out to kill them, Ruby tagged along. There were a few normal Beowolves, one Alpha. I killed all the smaller ones, I was about to kill the Alpha...and I tripped. It wasn't even a mistake. There was a hole, hidden by snow. I couldn't have known it was there. The Alpha would have killed me...but Ruby tore it apart. If she hadn't...there's no way I'd have survived. It wasn't even my fault. It was just dumb luck. That would have been it." She finally locked eyes with Glynda, as tears welled within. "It would have hurt everyone so much. You all would have had to suffer. What the hell was I doing, going out to fight like that?" Pyrrha warbled. "I could have contacted Weiss and Yang, or you and Blake, or taken along Ren at least. But I went out on my own like a damned fool."

"You did what you thought was best." Glynda soothed. "We all make errors in judgement."

"It's nice of you to say so, but that doesn't really help." Pyrrha sighed. "I feel awful, mentally and physically - I cannot focus my thoughts, I feel nauseous, my skin clammy and my sweat cold." She lifted a trembling hand. "My heart hammers within my chest. Mistralis would call it Battle Shock."

"I've experienced something similar in the past." Glynda noted.

"Do you have any method of dealing with it?" Pyrrha asked.

"Nothing remotely healthy, unfortunately." Glynda admitted. "Did Port teach you any techniques?"

"No." Pyrrha shook her head, pausing for a moment. "I could try the Mistrali method, or something
"What would that entail?" Glynda asked.

"There are several stages, but all I need from you is food and wine." Pyrrha answered.

"I could cook some chicken." Glynda suggested. "And I have plenty of wine. Do you prefer any type in particular?"

"I'll take the strongest you have." Pyrrha replied. "Two bottles."

"You're not going to drink two bottles of wine on your own, are you?" Glynda pressed.

"I would hope I won't be drinking alone." Pyrrha noted.

"Very well, then what?" Glynda inquired.

"A ritual bath." Pyrrha answered. "That normally wouldn't be the end of it, but that's as far as I'm willing to take it."

"Fair enough." Glynda nodded. "Is there anything Ruby or I can do until the food is ready?"

"Ruby could start drinking with me." Pyrrha managed a laugh. "I wonder if she likes wine."

Ruby did like wine. At least she seemed to, making no complaints as she shared it with Pyrrha. The summon was surely interested in more conversation, but Pyrrha was not ready just yet. She was not sure the wine was helping, but at least she no longer felt nauseous. By the time the food was ready, she and Ruby had consumed half a bottle, split about evenly between them. Pyrrha was feeling tipsy, but the summon was apparently unaffected. In any case, the meal - chicken with various side dishes - was quickly consumed, along with the rest of the bottle. Pyrrha ate notably more than she normally would in a single sitting, but that was the point. She was not in the habit of drinking alcohol either. It was all part of the process.

After eating, Pyrrha headed up to her room, followed closely by Ruby. Along with the fresh bottle of wine she had brought along, she grabbed a change of clothes and turned to the summon. "There's a red box on the top shelf of my closet. Please retrieve it and bring it to me in the bathroom."

"Okay." Ruby agreed as Pyrrha left the room. She opened the closet and quickly spotted the box, though she had to stand on her toes to reach it. It was not very large, nor heavy, and the top was lined with a layer of dust, obviously built up over several years. Ruby took the box to the bathroom as instructed, and on opening the door found the water already running to fill the tub, the bottle of wine set on the floor beside it, and Pyrrha disrobing. "Oh! Sorry!" She squeaked, turning her back. Pyrrha had always been uncomfortable with nudity, and avoided anyone - Ruby included - seeing her naked.

"That's alright." Pyrrha soothed. "I need your help for this." Stripped down to her underwear, she took the box from the summon and placed it on the sink. She opened it, and Ruby peeked inside to see several baggies of reddish salt, a bronze cup, and a card with writing on it. Pyrrha removed one of the baggies, opened it, and poured it into the bathtub, turning the water a rose color.

"What are you doing?" Ruby asked. "What do you need me for?"

"I'm taking a Mistrali ritual bath." Pyrrha explained. "I'll explain your part when we get to it." As the water level in the tub rose, Pyrrha dipped her hand in to check the temperature. Apparently
satisfied, she turned off the taps, then untied her hair and removed the remainder of her clothing. Ruby could not help but notice the many scars on her body. It looked as though she had been fighting all her life. She probably had. Pyrrha stepped into the tub, slowly letting herself sink into the water. She took a deep breath and fully submerged herself for a few seconds before surfacing once more. "Alright Ruby."

"Yes?" Ruby responded.

"Inside the box there's a cup and a card." Pyrrha noted. "One side of the card has three lines on it."

Ruby removed the items from the box. "Got it."

Pyrrha shifted to a kneeling position. "Use the cup to pour the water over my head three times, reading one line each time." She bowed her head in prayer. "Whenever you're ready."

Ruby dipped the cup in the water, filling it, then slowly poured it over Pyrrha's head. "I cleanse thee of thy sins." She refilled the cup and repeated the process. "I cleanse thee of thy fear." Again. "I cleanse thee of thy pain." She waited for further instruction, but Pyrrha remained silent, her eyes shut.

"Thank you Ruby." Pyrrha finally spoke. She moved to a sitting position and sank into the water.

"What now?" Ruby asked.

"Now we relax, and drink." Pyrrha replied. She grabbed the bottle and opened it, drinking straight from it before handing it to Ruby, who did likewise.

"What's on the other side of the card?" Ruby questioned. She had noted the writing but not read it.

"It's another prayer, for another ritual." Pyrrha answered.

"Will we be doing that too?" Ruby inquired.

"Heavens no." Pyrrha chuckled.

"Why?" Ruby asked. "What is it? And what's all this about?"

Pyrrha sighed and took another drink from the bottle. "I almost died today Ruby. I've not been handling it well, as I'm sure you noticed. This isn't something I can just brush off, but before I can think about it rationally, I have to calm myself. This - the meal, the wine, the bath - is Mistrali post-battle tradition, albeit a heavily modified form. I'm hoping it helps me clear my head."

"Oh." Ruby nodded. "Why didn't you just do the normal tradition?"

"Because...it's a bit much." Pyrrha grimaced.

"What is it?" Ruby questioned.

"After a battle, warriors would return to the city temple." Pyrrha explained. "There they would strip, don ceremonial robes and participate in a sumptuous feast, with the finest food and wine, 'til they could bear no more. Afterwards, the warriors would retire to private rooms, with their spouses, or temple prostitutes, men and women who dedicated their bodies to the gods and the warriors who served them. They would bathe, and perform this ritual. Then...sex. Once satisfied, there would be a second bath, followed by rest." Pyrrha managed a laugh. "I'm going to go ahead and skip straight to resting."
"Okay...is it working?" Ruby asked.

"I certainly feel far less tense." Pyrrha observed. "Though that could just be the wine." She examined the now half empty bottle. "Part of me wants to finish this, but if I did I don't think I'd be able to dress myself afterwards...or walk for that matter."

"I could dress you, and carry you to your room." Ruby offered.

"No, I think I'm quite inebriated enough." Pyrrha shook her head. She took one last sip before handing the bottle to Ruby. "You can finish it." She paused as Ruby drank. "Ruby, I know you want me to talk to you about what I'm feeling. I'm sorry but...I'm just not ready yet."

"Maybe tomorrow?" Ruby suggested.

"Tomorrow, or the next day, or the next, I don't know." Pyrrha admitted. "There are other people I need to speak to as well. But when I'm ready, I promise I'll talk to you about it."

Pyrrha soaked in the tub as Ruby finished off the last of the wine, enjoying the tranquil silence and warmth. As she relaxed, Pyrrha's thoughts turned inward, muddled as they were by alcohol. Thankfully they took on a positive bent. The fears and regrets she had suffered earlier had departed, at least for now, and the sources of joy in her life came to the fore - her friends, Velvet, Weiss, Yang and Blake, her mentors Port and Glynda, her new sister Ilia. And Ruby. Her mind always came back to Ruby, and a question began nagging at her. She had to know the answer.

"Ruby, why did you kiss me?" Pyrrha asked.

"I'm not sure really." Ruby replied. "I've seen other people do it, and it just felt like the right thing to do at the time."

"Mhm..." Pyrrha nodded. "Do you know what the gesture means?"

"I think so." Ruby shrugged. "You kiss someone you like, when you're happy."

"There's more to it than that." Pyrrha noted. "At least there can be."

"Oh...did I do something wrong?" Ruby worried.

"No, nothing wrong." Pyrrha soothed. "I was just surprised, and curious."

"I'll warn you next time." Ruby promised.

Next time. Pyrrha felt a growing warmth in her chest at that.

Chapter End Notes

I've been having some difficulties writing recently, so consider this a rather sudden mid-season finale for the time being. Don't panic, I'm stubborn, I just need time to recharge.
Good morning Pyrrha! If I'm not here I might be with Blake. I wanted to learn more about my essence, and you deserve to sleep in. I hope you slept well!

Ruby folded the note and scribbled a little flower on it for good measure. Pyrrha loved her art, it would make her smile, and Ruby loved Pyrrha's smile. It inspired levity within her being, a gentle warmth that spread throughout her essence like a wave. It was something only Pyrrha could foster, and something Ruby had never questioned until now.

There was simply no reason. Pyrrha was her mistress, her caretaker, her reason for existence. She gave Ruby purpose and happiness, and in return, Ruby gave her service. It pleased her to help Pyrrha, to make her day brighter, her training smoother, her work easier, but recent events had taught Ruby something important, something disturbing. Pyrrha was fragile, for she was mortal.

Ruby had not told Pyrrha - it would only have worried her more - but she had known when Pyrrha was injured. She had felt it within her being, her head ached, her leg cried, and her essence had lit afire with worry and unease. When Pyrrha had been brought in, wounded and endangered, she felt fear, true fear, for the first time. She had felt it again as the Alpha's claws descended upon Pyrrha, her mistress, her life, her reason for being. For one brief moment another feeling had ignited within her, heated and painful, burning, flaring. She sought only the destruction of that wretched beast, and not a moment later it was dissipating in the snow.

Ruby had turned to her mistress, staring wide-eyed and frozen, and that feeling had turned to warmth, relief that Pyrrha was still alive, safe and sound within her arms. She had kissed her, because she saw no other way to express such joy, such calm and happiness in her presence. But why a kiss? Why did it feel so right? Blake would know, she knew everything. The aspect understood all that Ruby did not. Perhaps she could help Ruby understand her own actions, her own feelings.

"Blake is visiting Yang." Glynda answered, placing a plate of sliced steak before Ilia, who had managed to perch herself somewhat comfortably on one of the kitchen chairs. She speared a chunk clumsily with her fork, a prideful look on her face as she chomped down the rare morsel.

Ren and Nora were also in attendance, the latter making a mess of her steak, squinting down at the plate as though it were miles away. Ren kept a careful eye on her as he sliced his own meat. Nora would have preferred to devour the meat with teeth alone, but Glynda enforced civility at the table. That and poor Dew may have found the sight disconcerting. She had recovered enough to attend breakfast, though she remained pale and jittery, her sunken eyes flickering about the room as she picked at her own plate of sausages and eggs. Surprisingly Ilia drew her attention the least, her gaze
most often fixated upon the window and the room's exits.

"How is Pyrrha feeling?" Glynda asked.

"I'm not sure, she's still asleep." Ruby replied. "I thought it'd help."

Glynda hummed, reaching toward a glass on the nearby shelf. "She will likely be dehydrated." She explained, filling the glass in the sink. "Bring her water before you leave."

"Hair of the dog is more effective." Nora grunted, tearing a chunk from her slightly mangled steak.

"You're only saying that because it amuses you." Glynda sighed, handing the glass to Ruby.

"What can I say, I have first hand experience." Nora shrugged.

"Ignore the pup." Glynda advised. "Would you like something to eat?"

"May I have a muffin?" Ruby requested.

"Of course Ruby." Glynda plucked one from beneath its cover. "Tell Blake to fetch some flour on the way home. I'll be spending the day in."

"Can do!" Ruby cheered.

"It kinda' shakes me, ya' know?" Yang murmured, fingers stroking through Blake's fur, a gentle, soothing pur rumbling beneath her touch. "She's so strong and passionate, but then the nightmare hits and...I don't know what to expect, anger or sadness or both. I just wanna' help, but I don't know how."

The purring ceased, fur turning to hair as Blake transformed. Yang looked down into golden eyes as a gentle hand slid past her cheek, brushing the golden tear threatening to escape. "I may be able to help." Blake soothed. "I promise nothing, but to try."

"I know kitten." Yang chuckled, grasping the hand in her own. "You're great like that."

"It comes naturally." Blake deadpanned, much to Yang's continued amusement.

"Oh, I bet you do-mpf!" Yang's laugh was barely muffled as Blake's hand slapped over her mouth, the dark aspect hardly sparing a glare in her direction.

"Enough from you." Blake sighed, ignoring the heat of Yang's tongue flicking against her palm.

The fire aspect was an interesting companion, intelligent and astute, yet so quick to distract. The pain thrumming within her being tugged at Blake's metaphorical heartstrings. She understood the torture of helplessness, the blood staining her essence ran deep and rich. Glynda had saved her from that fate, and asked naught but company in return. Yang was younger by a thimble, yet so much more heartfelt. In spite of her suffering, she held hope for humanity, cared for all who lived, and willingly defended them with her all. She shared Weiss' pain and gave herself freely to soothe it. Now that it was not enough, she took that suffering as her failing.

Blake understood the feeling all too well, and it pained her too see it. She only hoped she could help, if only to maintain this bright light. It truly felt like so little brightness was left in this realm. She was about to offer a few words of encouragement when a rapid knock sounded at the door.

Yang sighed and the pair stood, heading over to greet the visitor. Hopefully they would not be bearing bad news, but good so rarely came at this time of day. It was usually a report of Beowolves
"Blake, Yang, hey, good morning!" Ruby cheered. "I needed to talk to Blake and you weren't there, and Glynda said you were here, and it's kinda' important and I think and I hope I'm not interrupting anything because I just..." Ruby huffed, retaining her cheerful smile. "I'm sorry, I'm rambling. How are you? Is Weiss doing well?"

Blake exchanged an amused glance with Yang, who laughed, pulling Ruby off her feet for a tight bear hug. "C'meme you! A little kitty told me you bisected a big bad wolfie!" Ruby muffled a response into the fire aspect's chest. Blake shut the door as Yang carried the young aspect back to the couch, releasing her onto the cushions before flopping down beside her. "How's Pyrrha feelin'?" She asked, throwing an arm around Ruby's neck. Blake smoothly flitted onto the couch opposite, boxing in Ruby.

"Well, I don't know yet really, I kinda' left her asleep today because she drank a lot last night and...well, I did something, and I didn't think it was weird, but now I think it was, and I can't stop thinking about why I did it." Ruby rambled once more.

"What happened exactly?" Blake asked.

"It was going well, a small pack of Beowolves with an Alpha, Pyrrha was awesome!" Ruby began. "I didn't even need to help. I just stayed back and paid attention, but then she stepped in a hole and fell! And the Alpha was..." Ruby shuddered, her hands clenched into fists. "It was so close to..." She struggled with the word, her jaw clenching as she glared down into her lap. Yang exchanged another, more concerned glance with Blake, who sat perfectly still, a hand lying upon Ruby's shoulder. "I thought I was going to lose her. I thought that monster was going to take her away from me. It hurt. It burned to think about, in here." She lay a fist across her chest. "I didn't really know what I did until I did it. The Alpha was dead and Pyrrha was okay, and I was so happy she was safe. I'd saved her and she wasn't gone. I hugged her, and I kissed her, and I don't really know why. I mean, we've kissed one another before, but on the cheek, never on the lips. I've only seen you do that Blake, with Glynda, but I did it, and I don't know why, and I thought Pyrrha was just a bit shocked from the fight, and she was, but when she was drinking she asked my why I did it, and I didn't know. I was happy, so I kissed her, and it felt right, but why did it feel right? Why did I kiss her on the lips instead of the cheek? Am I weird? Am I being weird? I don't know anymore. I don't know why I'm feeling so...so..." Ruby slumped, sinking into the seat. "I don't know how to describe what I feel. I was hot, then cold, then warm, and hot, and nothing makes me feel this way but Pyrrha."

"Rubes..." Yang soothed, wrapping the aspect in another warm embrace, grinning at her dark counterpart, who seemed just as intrigued, a fond smile tinting those golden eyes. "I think we understand you perfectly here."

"Do you feel what Pyrrha feels?" Blake inquired.

"Sometimes." Ruby croaked. "When she was hurt in battle, I ached. When she's sad, I'm sad, and when she's happy, I feel warm."

Yang giggled, pulling Ruby closer with a squeak. "Ooooh Ruby!" She squealed. "You're bonding!"

"What?!" Ruby exclaimed.

"Your essence is bonded to Pyrrha's soul!" Yang explained. "Like Blakey and Glynda!"
"Really?" Ruby asked.

"Perhaps it was a consequence of the ritual." Blake theorized.

"Or maybe you did it yourself!" Yang suggested.

"But how?" Ruby pressed. "I don't even know what bonding really is."

"Bonding isn't always something you do on purpose." Blake noted. "The strongest bonds form naturally, with time and care, but this is a gradual process, you shouldn't be so close so soon."

"Unless you're doing it on purpose...but by accident." Yang added.

"But that doesn't make sense." Ruby protested.

"It makes more sense than you think, considering the circumstances." Blake countered. "Ruby, how do you view Pyrrha?"

"Well...she's Pyrrha." Ruby shrugged. "She brought me into this world, she gave me a chance to live and learn, and be happy, and making her happy makes me happier...I don't ever want to be without her. The thought of that happening makes me cold...then it makes me angry...and then I get sad." Her breath hitched. "I don't like being sad, Pyrrha would want me to be happy."

"Oh boy, you're in deep aren't you?" Yang pulled Ruby into her lap and cradled her gently, unsteady silver eyes staring at warm gold and lilac. "Listen to us Ruby. What you are feeling is normal, and okay. There's nothing bad about being angry or sad, because it means you care. That you care so much means your bond with Pyrrha runs deep and true, because you love her, like we love Glynda and Weiss."

"I do?" Ruby asked.

"We believe so Ruby." Blake confirmed. "It's rare that aspects such as us bond with humans to this level. To do so naturally shows a depth of attraction and care that surpasses simple companionship. That you do not understand is only out of ignorance." She shifted closer, joining Yang in close proximity to the young summon, smiling as warmly as she could muster. "You're in love with Pyrrha, Ruby, and instinctually trying to express it, where words fail you. Your very essence is latching onto her soul, and on a deeper level she is accepting you."

Ruby looked thoughtful, before her features seemed to light up as she smiled, cheeks tinting the lightest of pinks. "I love Pyrrha." Yang and Blake nodded. "And I want to kiss her for it." More nods. "Wow...what do I do now?"

"Well, I guess that depends on who Pyrrha is." Yang shrugged. "Humans are weird about love, and this one's from Mistral...Mistral is..."

"Completely unrepresentative of who Pyrrha defines herself to be." Blake interjected.

"Really?" Yang huffed. "So there's no-"

"No." Blake insisted.

"And she doesn't-" Yang tried to ask.

"No." Blake repeated.

"Not even any-" Yang began again.
"None of it Yang." Blake confirmed. "Pyrrha defined herself differently. It's why she's here."

"Huh..." Yang scratched her head.

"Is that bad?" Ruby asked.

"No, just means I don't know as much about her as I expected...but that's not important, for now-"

Yang was once again interrupted, this time by a loud slam against the nearby door, as Weiss' office thrummed with commotion. "Damnit." Blake spat.

Pyrrha's eyes cracked open, only to be met by blinding light. She rolled away from the window, hoping to escape the pain, but with her eyes soothed, her headache came to the fore. She groaned, reaching for Ruby - perhaps the summon could heal a hangover the way she healed wounds - but the bed was empty. "Ruby?" Pyrrha croaked, once again daring to open her eyes. She received no answer and found only a folded paper and cup of water on the bedside table.

The amount of light pouring into the room clearly indicated it was later than when she would usually awaken. Ruby must have decided to let her sleep in. Eyes squinting against the still too bright room, she reached for the water and quickly downed it. Hydrating was the best way to prevent a hangover, and the best way to cure it. She must not have done enough the night before. She sat up, rubbing her temples in hopes her head would stop throbbing. It did not.

Pyrrha sighed and grabbed the paper, smiling at the little flower Ruby had drawn on it. Unfortunately the pretty picture did nothing to soothe her pounding headache, nor acclimatize her overly sensitive eyes to the light. She pushed on, unfolding the paper to read the note. Part of her was thankful that Ruby had let her sleep in, and the glass of water had been quite thoughtful, but she already missed the little summon. The bed seemed so cold without her and the room so empty.

No matter, it was already late in the morning and Pyrrha had to get moving. There were chores to do, training to catch up on, and she still had patients under her care. Still, as much as she wanted to get going right away, her pounding headache would not let her. Instead she collected a change of clothes - something Ruby usually did for her - and took a long shower, hoping the warm water would soothe her. It worked, but only a little.

After completing her morning routine, Pyrrha headed downstairs to the kitchen, hoping to catch the tail end of breakfast. When she arrived she found the meal was, for all intents and purposes, over. There were a few muffins remaining, but the plates were already washed, and Ilia was carefully stacking them in the cabinet. The lamia stood as tall as she could, balancing further down on her tail to gain extra height, to reach the shelf. As Glynda looked on with a proud smile, Ilia put the plates away, gently placing each atop the stack, as if they would shatter at the slightest shock.

Why Ilia insisted on helping clean up, Glynda could not say. Perhaps she wished to repay her mother for taking her in, or maybe she just wanted to feel more like part of the family. Whatever the reason, the proud smile on her face filled Glynda with joy and heartened Pyrrha. It was almost enough to make her forget the headache. Pyrrha needed one of the plates for her own meal, but she was not about to interrupt the lamia. She simply walked over and waited for her to finish her task.

Ilia placed the final plate atop the stack, softly enough that it hardly made a _clink_. Then she slumped back down to her normal height and turned to find herself suddenly face-to-face with Pyrrha. She had not heard her approach, and threw her arms in the air, screaming in surprise. Before Pyrrha could even react, Ilia disappeared with a _whoosh_, cut off mid scream. Pyrrha staggered back, mouth agape, gesturing frantically at the spot where Ilia had been standing.
Glynda, who initially shared in her shock, breathed a sigh of relief and closed her eyes.

"Wha-what...where...Glynda?!” Pyrrha stammered.

"She teleported." Glynda replied.

"Where did she go?" Pyrrha asked.

"Weiss' house." Glynda answered.

"How-" Pyrrha started.

"Blake's there." Glynda preempted the question.

"Oh." Pyrrha took a series of deep breaths in an attempt to calm herself. "Should we go get her?"

"No, Blake can handle it." Glynda noted. "It'll be good for their relationship."

Pyrrha let loose a relieved sigh and attempted to calm her racing heart. She was certainly awake now.

Weiss slaved away at writing her book. She was working on it more and more often. It was a necessary distraction. Her office was rather spacious and somewhat cluttered, with papers and equipment scattered about. Pretty much the only tidy part was the bookcase, which she had painstakingly arranged by topic and importance. The room was dimly lit, illuminated by candles and a magical crystal affixed to the ceiling, but as a vampire the low light was more than sufficient to allow her to see clearly.

Just as she began another passage in a chapter about aspects, there was a burst of air, strong enough to extinguish the candles. She knew it well, it was the sign of an incoming teleportation, a wave of overpressure caused by energy from the void leaking into the mortal plain. She turned to face the disturbance, expecting to find Glynda or Blake. What she actually saw was very different.

Hanging in the air, just above a table, was a snake...no, a girl...a lamia! Weiss only barely resisted a scream as she tumbled back out of her chair. The lamia's levitation was short lived, and it fell atop the table, scattering the papers that covered its surface and tipping the extinguished candles, spilling molten wax all over the floor. The creature inelegantly bounced onto the floor with a thud.

It struggled to right itself, careening into some equipment Weiss used for measuring experiments with crystals, and knocking it over with a cacophony of metallic clangs.

Weiss scrambled to her feet and grabbed the sword she kept beside her desk. Shaking herself from her shock, she took a step forward and held the sword aloft. The lamia, appearing dazed, turned to face her in turn. Seeing the weapon and Weiss' fighting stance, the creature screamed and threw its hands in the air, turning to flee without looking. The lamia slammed straight into the bookcase, shattering several shelves and sending their contents tumbling to the floor. The whole piece of furniture began to totter, and the lamia struggled to hold it upright.

A sudden darkness overtook the room as Blake swept in, her essence quickly solidifying between Weiss and her target. "What are you doing?" Blake asked.

"I'm going to kill this...this...pest!" Weiss shouted.

"That pest belongs to Glynda." Blake noted, taking firm grasp of Weiss wrist.
"It's destroying my office!" Weiss yelled. "I don't care who owns it!"

"Weiss." Blake insisted, gripping tighter.

Having stabilized the bookcase, and seeing her chance, Ilia fled the room. The sound of a door slamming against a wall indicated she had barged into another room rather than fleeing the house. "I want that abomination out of my house now!" Weiss growled.

"That abomination is Glynda's...our daughter." Blake hissed.

Weiss stood as if frozen, her jaw slowly descending as the realization hit her. She released her sword and let it clatter to the floor. "Ah-huh?"

"Glynda and I will see to it that anything she damaged will be repaired or replaced." Blake noted. "Sorry to bother you." She let go of Weiss' wrist and brushed past her to leave the room, making enough contact to indicate her displeasure. All Weiss could do was stand there in shock.

Chapter End Notes

Here I am, doing all the things I can, holding on to what I am, pretending I not suffering from writers block.
One started as a burnout hiatus turned into Jws dolphin diving off a loading dock and breaking every bone in his body. He has been rebuilt and enhanced with sunglasses imbedded in his face, which makes writing in the dark hard, so we've been waiting for his eyes to adjust so he can do so once more.
Here's to finishing this season someday!
If Patch was anything, it was peaceful, Winter thought. That was quite an ironic label considering the events of the past month. Yet even still the people of Patch continued to live unconcerned, going about their days as if one of their protectors had not been the victim of an attack, that a Templar occupation had not recently ended, that a lamia had not slithered through their village.

The Templar Order considered lamia a passive, if dangerous pest. They were not openly hostile, unless they or their young were threatened. Even still, a lamia matron was more inclined to gather the strongest of her young and flee if faced with serious danger. That reaction was vital for a successful extermination. A lamia matron would likely flee to its den, assuming the attack occurred a sufficient distance away. All the Templars had to do was locate the den in advance and rig it with explosive charges while the occupants were away. The matron and her remaining young would perish in fire. Any captured lamia would be studied and ultimately terminated.

During her time with the Templars, Winter had found lamia horrifying. They were aberrations of nature, humanity meddling with innocent beings to create the perfect killing machine for their own machinations, the upper half human female, the lowe half snake, as if some poor girl had been half-devoured by a parasitic serpent. They were abominations, the remnants of humanity violating nature, living profane lives, reproducing through despicable means. It was the Templar Order's duty to hunt down and exterminate all such beings, putting them to rest and protecting the people. In other words, upholding the will of the Order.

Of course that was only part of the truth. Lamia were a very low priority for Templars. They were uncommon, rarely survived to matronage, and only took one female at a time. Mathematically, they were such a miniscule threat that the Order rarely bothered with them. Vampires were a far more important issue, werewolves could be a serious danger depending upon the pack and location. Lamia were hardly a threat at all, like the dryders now believed extinct, or centaurs who refused to leave Mistral.

No, the lamia were a passive annoyance, too small a danger to waste resources on, too secluded to integrate into civilization like the centaurs had. They were left mostly to their own devices, plucking incubators from lone travelers, caravans and occasionally homeless populations. The early parts of Glynda's book chronicled this. It was all rather cold and clinical, the product of a scientific and curious mind. At first.

Winter found it fascinating how the writing slowly changed as she progressed through the tome. Glynda's perception of the situation altered, and she became aware of those shifts. Detached descriptions became punctuated by reflections on her own feelings, the gradual of her maternal nature becoming more and more clear. The subject became her mate, the eggs her future children. Their development was painstakingly documented, from the circumference of Glynda's stomach the the emergence of their unique souls from her own.
Winter had found herself enthralled, frighteningly so, by several of the descriptions, especially those clearly written by Blake. The impregnation and ensuing birth contained passages from both the witch and the aspect, for obvious reasons. The former had been rather emotional to read. She found herself moved to tears by Glynda's words, the adoration each description exuded, the size of her clutch, the warmth they inspired within her, every minute shift of each egg, and the growing anticipation of their hatching.

Their hatching...Winter had taken a break after that passage. Certain details left her quite raw. Suffice to say she was unprepared to find herself so affected. But then again she had never once given motherhood serious thought, let alone pondered the potential consequences. She had never intended to be a mother. She expected to die in service to her homeland, protecting the people with her life was all that she could be. But here was Glynda the Good, the most powerful human she had ever met, a mother to lamia. It was a complete shock, but the more she thought, and the more she read, the more sense it made. The experience had changed her, aged her in a way not visible to the mortal eye, but Winter could see, and she was ravenous to know more. Next time she would need something strong to drink, and comfort food.

As she followed the path toward Weiss' home, she wondered if her sister knew. If so, she must have been sworn to secrecy, as she had not mentioned it to her. If not, perhaps it was for the best. She had no idea how deep Templar indoctrination still ran within Weiss. Her reaction might be volatile. Considering the nature of lamia, Weiss might find them especially disgusting. Ilia certainly did not disgust Winter. If anything she was almost cute.

Knocking three times, Winter opened the front door, stepping into the warmth of the doorway. If there was one silver lining to the fire aspect's continued presence, it was the sheer warmth that filled the darkened home. She could do without Yang's attitude, the stubborn candle always found a way to push her buttons. Shirling her coat onto its hanger, she pushed past the curtain blocking the light, to find an oddly crowded lounge. Weiss was standing in the office doorway, the room visibly messy from her viewpoint. Yang stood with Ruby by the hallway, down which Blake was visible, standing before the spare bedroom, Winter's bedroom for the duration of her stay.

"Good morning." Winter greeted, raising a brow in question. "What has happened now?"

Weiss huffed, lips tight as she glared toward the mess on the floor. "I received a sudden and uninvited guest." She groused. "As I went to remove it, I was informed it was the daughter of a certain witch we happen to know."

Winter's other brow rose in surprise. "Ilia visited?"

"You know about her?" Weiss balked.

"I learned of her yesterday, yes." Winter confirmed, stepping closer to the hallway. "What do you mean remove?"

"I mean remove." Weiss glared. "I hardly expected this lamia to be anything more than some fool's practical joke."

"Did you harm her?" Winter asked.

"Hardly." Weiss scoffed. "If any harm came it was due to her thrashing about my belongings." She huffed again. "I have to resort my bookshelf, again."

"I said I was sorry!" Yang protested.
"Sorry doesn't make it less irritating Yang!" Weiss shot back.

Winter sighed, pinching her brow. Weiss always channeled annoyance when avoiding a subject. "Very well then." She spoke, loud and clear. Weiss stared as she walked by, passing Ruby with a polite nod and heading down the hall. The aspect at her door stared straight through her as she approached.

"Winter." Blake acknowledged.

"Blake, how fares Ilia?" Winter inquired.

"Traumatized." Blake replied.

"My sister is not that frightening." Winter countered.

"She is when you're hardly more than a child." Blake groused. "She refuses to come out."

"And your plan is?" Winter asked.

"Wait." Blake answered.

"For what?" Winter pressed.

"The endtimes." Blake deadpanned. "What do you suppose?"

"Do you even know what she's doing in there?" Winter questioned.

"Rifling through your underwear probably." Blake shrugged.

"Blake." Winter admonished.

"Hiding, Winter, a habit of hers." Blake rolled her eyes.

"And why don't you slip inside?" Winter asked.

"She locked the door." Blake observed. "Clearly she wishes not to be disturbed."

Winter leveled a blank stare at the aspect, effortlessly reflected by Blake's own glassy golden eyes. She felt a pang of annoyance. "You have never dealt with children before, have you?"

"Today is my day off." Blake deflected. "If you think you can do better, be my guest." She stepped away, leaning against the wall opposite.

"Very well." Winter resigned, reaching into her pocket for the key and gently knocking on the door. "Ilia, it's Winter." Slipping the key onto the lock, Winter opened the door and stepped inside.

To her surprise, the room was seemingly still in order. It was quite a sparse room, with little more than a bed, desk, wardrobe and bedside table. A small but secure chest held Winter's more important belongings, while her clothes and essentials were neatly packed away. The only differences from her departure that morning were the drawn curtains and the small length of tail poking from beneath the bed.

"I just popped out for a bit of shopping." Winter began, closing the door softly. "The bakery was selling some rather delicious smelling sweetrolls this morning. The sample proved far above expectations." Placing the basket on her bed, Winter sat beside it, opening the wicker and reaching inside. "Have you ever had a sweetroll before? I developed quite a weakness in my youth, and my
hips have never forgiven me." Pulling free a small paper package, she unwrapped a roll, revealing its spiraled, cinnamon goodness, the sugar glaze glistening from the warmth. "Here, try a bite. I don't believe yours will mind." Tearing the roll in half, she placed it on the floor, resting upon the wrapper of course. She took a bite of her own half, savoring the rich sweetness as it melted on her tongue. Life held few pleasures so simple and guiltless as this indulgence.

From the corner of her vision, Winter could see a soft, tanned hand slowly reach out to grasp the very edge of the wrapper, dragging the pastry beneath the bed. She felt a smile grow across her lips, a drop of pride warming her heart. Children were a valuable part of Templar operations. They run everywhere, see everything. Their stories, so often discounted as wild fairy tales and imaginings, but what an adult might brush off, a child may remember clear as day. So Winter had learned how to coax out shy children. It was hardly difficult.

"I apologize for my sister." Winter began, her voice low and gentle. "We were raised to fear and hate many things, and unfortunately Weiss has suffered a great deal as of late." She took another bite of her roll, allowing the silence to settle for a time. "I promise she will not harm you, not now, nor ever. And when you feel calm enough to come out, I can escort you home." There came a crinkling of paper and the shifting of scales, as the mass below her bed slowly slithered, until two bright blue eyes became visible, shyly staring up from the floor. Winter smiled, as warm as she could muster. "Good morning Ilia. It's a pleasure to see you again."

Ilia smiled back.

It had taken Pyrrha some time to recover from the shock of Ilia's sudden teleportation. Glynda's calm demeanor had helped, but her heart refused to stop racing for quite a while. At least it made her forget about the hangover long enough to properly hydrate herself. As a bonus, Glynda gave her the day off. Dew, Ren and Nora had all already had their morning treatments, Glynda was spending the day in to work on a project she refused to discuss, Ruby could handle any outstanding chores when she returned, and all things considered, the witch felt Pyrrha needed it.

Having the day off did not mean Pyrrha would spend her time lounging around. The prior day's battle had not just taken a toll on her personally, it had left her weapons in sad shape. The edges of her shield were curled in and the face dented from all the bashing, and her spear was badly bent from her errant strike. She would need to take them to Port for repairs sooner or later, and Pyrrha was not one to leave for tomorrow what could be done today. Besides, he might be able to help with her still cluttered thoughts.

Pyrrha changed into heavier clothes, packed her weapons into a backpack, and headed into town. The streets seemed more empty than usual, but that was no surprise. It was bitterly cold, and that in itself would keep most indoors, but Solstice was nearly upon them as well. Many would be preparing for the celebrations and the market that accompanied them. Pyrrha would have liked to visit Velvet, but she would surely be busy, either making clothes for the festival or filling Glynda's custom order for Ilia. Port would likely be preparing as well.

When Pyrrha arrived at the forge, the blacksmith was indeed hard at work. He was sitting at the counter, shining a set of knives. No, not knives, daggers? Port looked up briefly, but did not stop working. "Hello Pyrrha!" He boomed. "What brings you here today?"

"Just some equipment repairs." Pyrrha replied. "Why are you making so many daggers? Out of silver no less?"

"Weiss wanted me to make a dagger for every household on the island." Port explained. "She was kind enough to donate the silver as well. She wants everyone to have a defense against vampires
"Wouldn't stakes be more appropriate?" Pyrrha questioned.

"That's what I said!" Port shouted, throwing his hands in the air and letting the dagger clatter to the countertop. "She thinks they're too clumsy. Maybe, but what about tradition?"

"She does have a point." Pyrrha admitted. "Daggers are more utilitarian as well."

"I suppose." Port sighed. He slid the daggers aside and wiped his hands on a nearby rag. "So, what do you need me to fix?"

"Fix is probably the wrong word." Pyrrha placed her backpack on a clear portion of the counter. "I just need some minor repairs." She slid the gear out of the bag and Port scanned them with a critical eye.

"You must have been in quite a fight." Port observed. He picked up the spear, noting how badly the tip was bent. "How did you manage this? Were you sparring with a boulder?"

"An Alpha Beowolf actually." Pyrrha corrected. "I tripped and hit one of its back plates."

"Hmm, I'm surprised you survived to tell the tale." Port stated grimly.

"I am too." Pyrrha slumped with a sigh. "If Ruby hadn't stepped in..."

Port noticed the profound shift in Pyrrha's mood. "Let's discuss this in my office." He gestured to the open door behind the counter as he stood from his stool. As Pyrrha headed for the back room he passed her, going to lock the entrance and place a sign in the window indicating he would be back in a few minutes. The blacksmith then entered his office to find Pyrrha standing before his desk. "Take a seat." He gestured to the chair before it. Port circled the desk and sat in a somewhat worn and ornate chair on the other side. It was probably older than Pyrrha was. "Tell me what happened."

"There was a small pack of Grimm, nothing I could not handle." Pyrrha started. "Just a few normal Beowolves with one Alpha. Killing the smaller ones was no problem, and I had the Alpha right where I wanted it, then...I stepped forward to attack and my foot fell into a hole. It was hidden under the snow, so there was no way I could have known it was there. Just as the Alpha was about to end me, Ruby rushed in and ripped it in half. I...I should have died."

Port nodded, reaching into a drawer to retrieve a bottle of whiskey and a pair of glasses. He slid a glass in front of Pyrrha and filled it before filling his own. "Now it's all you can think about?"

"Yes." Pyrrha confirmed. "I...know the risks, obviously. I always suspected I would die on the battlefield, and for a lot of my life I almost welcomed that...but now..." She took a deep and shaky breath, struggling to compose herself. "It was about acceptable risks, like you always taught us. I thought that as long as I properly judged the situation and executed perfectly, I would be fine. But I almost died because of something completely beyond my control."

"Even for the most perceptive warrior, there will always be an element of the unknown." Port noted, taking a sip of whiskey. "It's only by sheer luck that I'm alive to talk to you. The arrow that knocked out my teeth just as easily could have pierced my brain or heart or spine."

"It's more than that." Pyrrha continued. "After it happened, all I could think of was how stupid it even was for me to be out there. There are two werewolves in the house, one in near perfect health. My friends include a vampire, multiple aspects, and an incredibly powerful witch. Any one of them..."
would be better suited to fighting Grimm. What was I even doing, risking my life like that? If I had died, it would have caused you all so much pain. And for what? For me to feel the thrill of combat? Those Beowolves weren't an immediate threat. It was selfish-

"You're not selfish." Port cut her off. "I know the spiral your mind is in. I've experienced it myself. It's all 'what if's and regrets. They'll just destroy you. We all make mistakes, we all have regrets, but we mustn't dwell on them."

"I know." Pyrrha sighed. "But I don't think I can do it anymore, putting my life on the line like that."

"So stop." Port suggested.

"What?" Pyrrha was taken aback. "I can't just stop helping people."

"Like you said, this island has plenty of potential protectors." Port pointed out. "You're already training as a witch, focus on that. Witches help people just as much as huntresses."

"I don't even want to be a witch." Pyrrha admitted. "I only trained under Glynda to learn to raise the dead, to bring back Jaune, and I failed. Now I have nothing."

Port scratched his chin before downing his glass. He quickly refilled it. "Is that so..." He paused. "Do you really believe you have nothing?"

"Not nothing really, just no direction, no goal, no purpose." Pyrrha elaborated.

"If you could choose to do anything, what would it be?" Port asked.

"I don't know." Pyrrha leaned forward, resting her elbows on the desk, her face in her hands. "Caring for the sick and injured is something that's always interested me. I suppose I would do something like that."

"So ask Glynda to teach you healing magic, potion-making and the like." Port advised. "You have the intelligence and the perseverance to do anything you set your mind to."

"She will not be pleased." Pyrrha cautioned.

"Why's that?" Port asked.

"Because she's wasted her time training me to be a witch, just for me to decide I don't want that anymore." Pyrrha replied.

"If I know her as well as I think I do, and I'm pretty sure I do, I don't think she'll have the slightest problem with it." Port countered. "She just wants you to be happy. We just want you to be happy. You've spent your whole life focusing on the happiness of others. For once you need to focus on yourself. You don't need to be miserable to help people."

"I suppose." Pyrrha allowed. "But I don't want to stop protecting people either."

"I have an idea for that, but for now, you need to tell Glynda how you really feel." Port insisted. "Get yourself on track. Find what makes you happy." He glanced at Pyrrha's still full glass. "And take your medicine!"

Pyrrha grimaced and took hold of the glass. She managed to down the alcohol with a shiver. "Very well, I'll talk to Glynda."
Blake could not help but smirk at the sight before her. After all, her first meeting with Winter had been during her more devout years, with a heart full of vigor and a mind full of hate. According to Glynda, she had been paired with the witch in order to mellow her, broaden her horizons. Considering how that ended with Blake almost breaking her spine, it could probably have gone better, and certainly should have gone worse. It could have been Adam fighting her, he would not have held back as she did.

Winter's pride never truly recovered from that wound. She had obviously never seen defeat before that point, at least not so thorough a thrashing. Their odd meetings since had always seen that fear show in those stern blue eyes. But now something else flashed within, something Blake had seen many times before in a certain witch - a flicker of warmth, a drop of energy, igniting the flames of curiosity. And those eyes had hardly left Ilia since emerging from her room.

The sight was frankly hysterical. At a certain point in her life, Winter would have seen Ilia exterminated, yet now hung upon her every murmured word as they walked...and slithered...side by side...hand in hand. That Ilia was talking to Winter was almost a miracle in itself. The girl had always been shy, and had barely shared a single conversation with anyone since her arrival. Yet here she was, fifteen minutes into their trip, and not a moment had been silent.

"It's kinda' odd that she gets along with Ilia, isn't it?" Ruby observed from above.

Blake preferred to travel in her feline form. It drew less attention, as cats tended to wander the streets at random, even if her fur was impossibly dark. It was such a comforting form as well, her mother's gift, her inheritance. Simple and peaceful, aspects of existence it had taken Blake centuries to truly understand. "What makes you say that?"

"She didn't like me when we met, and she doesn't like Yang." Ruby observed.

"Winter dislikes the unknown, and unreasonable." Blake explained. "She didn't know you, and Yang takes joy in antagonizing her. Her first impression was rather negative after all."

"And Ilia?" Ruby asked.

"Introduced calmly, by a trustworthy individual, who provided her with the means to better understand the situation at hand." Blake replied. "It seems Winter made good progress with said material."

"But isn't Ilia a target of the Templars?" Ruby pressed.

"Winter is an enlightened individual." Blake noted. "General Ironwood may be draconian in his methodology, but he is not ignorant. The blind fanaticism of the religious sect is dangerous and in need of restraint. Winter was a Specialist, a member of a select group groomed to become leaders."
Part of this involved deconditioning, a healthy dose of reality, that monsters are rarely just monsters, and great care must be taken when deciding what to act upon and how."

"So she doesn't want to kill anything else?" Ruby inquired.

"The only race Winter truly despises is vampires, and that is personal, not professional." Blake answered. "Werewolves, lamia, spriggans? They are aspects of nature now, regardless of their origin. They exist on their own terms, and typically hold no malice toward humanity, only those who interfere with their lives. Werewolves are a passive danger to be monitored, spriggans need only be dealt with when a matronage becomes truly offended, and lamia?" Blake laughed, despite herself. "It would seem this is the first time Winter has met one outside of an autopsy."

The path to Glynda's homestead split off from the main road, the large house peaceful atop its incline. "Of all the things I envy in others, it's their ability to simply be content with their lives." Winter sighed. "I always feel as if my time has been wasted, as if I could have done better with my day."

"I have given little thought to my life." Ilia admitted. "Every day has been struggle and pain."

"I sympathize, my upbringing was also fraught with trials." Winter commiserated.

"Trials?" Ilia asked.

"Loss, sacrifice, training and learning." Winter explained. "All things we must face on the path to adulthood. Granted my own experiences were far from the norm." Winter tapped her hand upon Ilia's, clasping it in both her own without pause. "But my trials are not yours, and you are still so very young, even for a lamia."

"What do you know of my kind?" Ilia inquired.

"Admittedly, little." Winter chuckled. Chuckled. Blake almost tripped. "My time in the Order taught me...essentials...but time further taught me that was not enough. Nothing so bare can ever be enough. To limit one's self is weakness, and knowledge is true power in this great and terrible world."

"If knowledge is power, what is magic?" Ilia asked.

"A means to an end, a tool at our disposal, a key to unlock many mysteries." Winter answered. "Magic is nothing without the will to use it, and the mind to apply it to greater goods, or even evils."

"Evils?" Ilia quirked her brow.

"Evil creates, as it destroys, for every battle fought we grow." Winter philosophized. "Every war makes us stronger, every battle makes us smarter, humanity ever striving for efficiency. Weaponry, armor, healing, anything that makes us stronger and the enemy weaker by proxy. So much of what humanity has accomplished has been in the face of evil, perceived or otherwise."

"But how can evil be evil in perception only?" Ilia asked.

"In the same sense, my sister frightens you, yet I do not, yes?" Winter countered.

"No?" Ilia responded.

"Yet so many fear your kind for the natural order of propagation, and it is the natural order."
Winter continued. "You are not the proxy warriors of old, but a race unto your own, with as much right to survival as any other."

"Humanity fears us because we need them to reproduce, we have no alternative." Ilia noted.

"And history has proven such a process can be handled with care." Winter suggested. "Like the centaurs...unlike the vampires. Lamia can live peacefully among humanity, seeking willing mates. The issue is awareness, and unfortunately the faithful among the Templar Order are staunchly against any such truths."

"Mama taught me the Templars don't care enough to differentiate." Ilia observed.

"Your mother is rather biased against Templars." Winter cautioned. "Many disagreements and conflicts have occurred between herself and my superior." Approaching the front door of the home, Winter paused, glancing at the living room's draped window, then back to Ilia, wide blue eyes rapt with attention. They were barely a shade lighter than Weiss'. "The Templar Order is flawed, for it is a reflection of humanity, it's fear, it's hope, it's grief and it's anger. As a result, great cruelty has been inflicted upon the world by its hands, and mine are far from clean." She slipped her hand free of the lamia's grasp, clapping them in her lap. "But nothing is gained from allowing our failures to hold us back. No matter how painful or shameful they may be, every fall is a lesson in getting back up, and eventually, I expect you will teleport on purpose, just to say hello."

"But I don't want to teleport!" Ilia whined, pouting.

Winter chuckled once more. "Then learn to master it, and you need not teleport again. You do realize it's not normal to teleport by accident? Teleportation is not an easy thing. I have been studying the technique for years, yet my record is just ten feet. You've reached five thousand without trying."

"I know it's not normal." Ilia shrunk. "Everyone says as much, and I don't feel special for it."

"Magical affinity doesn't make anyone special." Winter declared. "If anything it makes them more prone to disaster." She laughed, shaking her head. "Best to learn only so much as to keep yourself safe. Perhaps some light defensive techniques, kinesis and healing…"

"You make it sound so easy." Ilia complained.

"Such things are easy." Winter insisted. "Mana manipulation is all in your head after all. It comes down to repetitive drilling and strengthening...your mother should have taught you this already. Why has she not?"

"I think we were supposed to begin today." Ilia replied.

"Well then, I can see the reason for the delay..." Winter nodded.

At that moment the door opened, revealing a rather concerned witch. "Ilia, my dear." Glynda sighed, a maternal smile gracing her features. "How fared your travel?"

"I am fine mama." Ilia answered, hands fumbling in front of her. "The...Winter...helped me calm."

Glynda's brow quirked strangely and she gave Winter an odd look, something between surprise and confusion, before schooling herself. "That's wonderful. Thank you Winter." Her brow quirked once more, her gaze directed behind them. "Ruby, what is that?"

Winter turned around to behold two things. First, Blake had vanished. Second, Ruby was beaming
brightly, holding a small bundle in her arms. "A puppy followed me home!" Ruby cheered.

*A puppy had followed her.* "Of course it did." Glynda murmured, a tired if fond smile settling on her face. "Would you like to stay for tea Winter?"

Winter glanced at Ilia, the flash of bright blue staring shyly back sending a twinge through her heart. "Tea would be lovely."

Winter had visited Glynda's basement in the past, but the thrumming of magical energy still did not sit well with her. It crackled at the back of her mind, sending the hairs on her arm on end, nipping at her heels. She felt on edge, especially knowing the nature of the spells in question. This was Glynda's domain, in ways not even the house above embodied. So she sat sipping her tea, nibbling at a large cookie as she observed the sight before her - a medical exam of all things.

Ilia stood bereft of her clothing, revealing for the first time the soft tan of her torso. From a distance the scales seemed invisible. Indeed, even under closer inspection they were hardly more than light mottling, glimmering gently in the light. It was odd to behold. The lamia Winter had born witness to in the past had either been fully matured or infantile. Ilia lacked the armor-like scales that formed across an adult body, but the areas from which they would spread were clear enough. Her elbows and spine saw small splotches of darker tan that would eventually thicken and spread, until her arms were gilded and the small claws turned to true talons. Her shoulders would crest, her throat and jawline encollared, and the small mounds on her chest would bloom into protective swirls. The diagrams in Glynda's book were striking in their detail and beautiful in the ferocity. To think this frail creature would grow into such a powerful matron was fascinating and frightening.

"You truly should be proud Ilia." Glynda encouraged. "It took me weeks of attempts to teleport across a township. To do so naturally, with *no injury* is astounding."

"It felt strange, like I was falling...in all directions...I couldn't see, but I *could*?" Ilia struggled to explain.

"Yes, the void is rather concerning to our perceptions." Glynda nodded. "Even with Blake's clarity I still scarcely comprehend its gaping maw."

"It was cold." Ilia added.

"An unfortunate result of the lack of head, in spite of the presence of vast energies...say *ah.*" Glynda ordered, holding up a small wooden wand. Ilia opened her mouth, wider than any human normally could, and allowed her tongue to extend. It was thinner and far longer than Winter had expected. Its forked end draped lazily over the rod, the blackened tips twitching at every little movement as Glynda peered inside her open mouth, the rest of her tongue a gentle grey. Glancing up, she met bright blue eyes once more. Ilia made a small exclamation of impatience. "Yes dear, all done." The witch chuckled as Ilia quickly retracted the organ with a pout.

"What were you expecting?" Winter asked

"Oh nothing, but you never know with this one, always putting strange things in her mouth." Glynda joked. Ilia whined, slithering away to one of the basement store rooms to disappear inside, passing Ruby along the way. The puppy in Ruby's lap snoozed away. "Ruby, your turn."

"I haven't put anything strange in my mouth!" Ruby protested.

"The puppy Ruby." Glynda rolled her eyes.
"Oh right!" Ruby chirped, hopping to her feet. The movement startled the little pup awake with a bark. "Oops, sorry little guy!" She apologized as she handed him over.

Glynda beheld the small dog, letting his feet dangle above the ground as he stared at her with dark black eyes. "This one belongs to the Beifongs. Their corgi had a litter not long ago. Odd that this one would stray so far from home, but who am I to judge. Your personality is rather...magnetic." The puppy barked.

"Have you come any closer to discovering your origin?" Winter asked, finishing the final bite of her cookie. It was delicious. "Or are we still a nebulous mystery?"

"I don't think I'm related to Nebula, but we're still not really sure yet." Ruby shrugged. "I'm just happy to be here." She beamed brightly, even in the dim light of the laboratory.

Winter could not help but smile. "Well then, I suppose that's what matters."

"Glynda?" Pyrrha's voice called from upstairs. "I bought cinnamon babka. Would you like some while it's fresh?"

"Down here Pyrrha." Glynda called. "One of the Beifong pups followed Ruby home."

The sound of hurrying footsteps came down the stairs, until Pyrrha entered. "Ruby? Winter? Is Ilia here?"

"No Pyrrha, she vanished into the aether." Glynda deadpanned.

"Ilia ran into the closet." Ruby pointed at the door. "I don't know what's in that one."

"Is it safe?" Winter asked.

"It ought to be, it's a portal to her room." Glynda replied.

"Weren't you the one who warned of frivolous short ranged wormholes?" Pyrrha pressed.

"My daughter's comfort and convenience is not frivolous." Glynda countered. "Though she's loathe to admit it, stairs cause her a fair bit of pain, paving stones too."

"A fair point." Pyrrha acquiesced, rubbing at her brow. "Ruby, how was your visit?"

"It went well!" Ruby squeaked. "I uh, learned a lot! Then Ilia came and everyone freaked out...so..."

"Perhaps you should offer babka to her." Glynda suggested. "Ilia has never tried cinnamon before."

"I do owe her an apology." Pyrrha agreed.

"And I know you'll never forgive yourself until you give one." Glynda rolled her eyes. "Go on, I have a guest to entertain." Pyrrha flushed, offering a respectful nod to Winter as she hefted her basket, placing it on a table. Glynda passed the puppy back to Ruby, who then opened the door, attaching herself to her mistress' arm, already beginning to chirp happily as the door cut them off.

"I love babka." Winter noted.

"Oh, I'm sure you do." Glynda smirked. "I remember the scrawny little thing they saddled me with years ago. Looked like a stiff wind could blow you down, and those ridiculous sleeves, if you can even call them that."
"I liked my uniform!" Winter protested.

"You would actually fill it out now." Glynda chuckled. "You've matured quite well, thanks to the babka."

"It was a little more than babka that earned me this physique." Winter noted.

"Oh yes, I'm sure all that time squeezing yourself through the void pushed all the weight to your hips." Glynda teased.

"And why are you staring at my hips?" Winter inquired.

"Why are you staring at my daughter?" Glynda shot back.

"Because she fascinates me." Winter admitted.

"An interesting complement," Glynda observed.

"Considering my upbringing, you must understand my ignorance, and curiosity." Winter suggested.

"And my writings do not satiate you?" Glynda pressed.

"Your writings enthrall me." Winter burst, before reality set in and she had the sense to look embarrassed. "They...are emotionally stimulating."

"How far have you read?" Glynda asked gently, as if concerned of frightening Winter away.

"To the hatching." Winter murmured, to witness the witch's expression turn melancholic.

"Ah yes, those memories are fond." Glynda sighed, her smile almost mournful. "I have difficulty deciding what I miss most of that time. There are so many pleasures I grew to appreciate more as time and distance went on...but I speak more on the matter in my writings."

"I never thought a human could truly feel so strongly for such creatures...I mean objectively a child is a child, but lamia are so..." Winter trailed off.

"Alien?" Glynda suggested.

"Uncanny." Winter corrected. "So much of humanity remains within them, yet no part of it is untouched by their reptilian nature. It's like looking at a reflection, but the mirror is tinted. You recognize the sight before you, but the alteration sets you off balance."

"At first it was easy to draw the line." Glynda admitted. "Cillia was a monster, my subject, my experiment, but as we grew closer, as she cared for me as her mate, the differences fell away, until all I could behold was her identity, a mother caring for her young, no matter the cost."

"You wrote similarly, but in notably different fashion." Winter observed.

"I wanted to keep my feelings at the time intact." Glynda explained. "I was still immature then. I had not the time to digest the extent of my emotions...my fondness increased tenfold with every passing day after I departed." She reached for a nearby cabinet, opening the doors and reaching within. "At the risk of spoiling the progression, I fell into depression, and struggled to cope with the separation. Blake was beside herself, the townsfolk were concerned. But I could hardly explain my predicament, especially not with young maidens looking up to me, the strongest female they were ever likely to meet, as she barely functioned for grief. Pulling something down, she held it close to her breast, a dull glow emanating outward, hidden from view. "But eventually I found
methods, to revel in the memories, experience the sensations once more, if only in part."

Turning, Glynda revealed the object in her hands. It was an egg, slightly larger than her fist, a mottled brown in color, its surface dull and nonreflective.

"Is that-" Winter started.

"No, it is not real, but gods, it's as close to reality as I can muster." Glynda smiled down at the replica, her hand caressing its surface as if it were a babe unto itself. "It took many attempts, by hand and magic, until I made this visage. Nothing will ever compare to reality, but the shadow was such a comfort to me, and to this day it calms me to hold." She sat before Winter and held out the egg. "Feel for yourself."

Winter stared at the replica, heart thumping oddly in her chest. This felt wrong to her, as if intruding on a deeply personal secret. Yet Glynda offered it freely, with such youthful joy on her face. She had never looked so young, despite seemingly never ageing. Winter slowly reached out and allowed Glynda to place the egg in her hands. Immediately she was shocked by how warm it was. A gentle squeeze revealed it was indeed hollow, but filled with some sort of liquid, dense enough that the weight was surprising, yet still comfortable to hold. The surface felt as rough as it looked, the deep brown speckled with various shades and tones. There were no visible seams, meaning it was of entirely magical creation, or the evidence had otherwise been concealed.

It was so strange, thinking that once upon a time Glynda had held an egg like this, filled with true life in the making, and one of those eggs had hatched into the creature Winter had found hiding under her bed that day. That beautiful, innocent creature, whose kin she had once wished exterminated. "Take it back." Winter whispered, suddenly overtaken by an ache in her eyes and heart. "I fear breaking it."

"Face that fear Winter, confront your feelings or you will run from them forever." Glynda advised.

Winter struggled to swallow the lump in her throat. Images, hostile and sickening, conjured, of dissections and hunts, the drone of her instructors, the scientists coldly prodding a tiny corpse, glassy blue eyes staring up at her. "Please." Winter plead, only to feel warm hands cup her own. She cringed at the enraged and bereaved howls that had filled the air as she watched the den tear itself apart.

"Life is beautiful, it is precious...and it must be protected." Glynda recounted. In no other time had it rung so true.

"I'm sorry." Winter managed.

"I know, but you will atone, bit by bit." Glynda soothed.

Winter could only nod, as the warmth between her hands grew colder, but the warmth over them blazed stronger. The ache in her heart began to fade.
"May I be clothed again?"

Pyrrha watched as Ilia stared down at the puppy before her bed. Seated in Ruby's lap, the canine panted quietly up at the lamia, innocent and cheerful, as any puppy would. Ilia seemed torn. It was likely she had never encountered a domesticated dog before. Wolves were a threat to lamia, especially the young. A decent sized pack could injure, if not kill even a mature lamia. They would easily make off with her snakelets. Here was Ilia, faced with a minuscule, tamed version of one of her natural predators. It was fascinating to watch the gears turn in her head.

"His teeth are really tiny." Ruby commented, lifting up the puppy's tiny cheeks to reveal the tiny white points. Ilia raised a brow, sinking into the pillow.

Pyrrha could not help but chuckle. "He won't hurt you Ilia. Why don't you give him a little pat? Like so." The redhead leaned forward, reaching out to give the pup a scritch atop his head, before smoothing out the fur with her palm. "The worst he'll do is sniff you."

Ilia flicked the tip of her tail against the pillows at the head of her bed, puffing her cheeks out as she glared at the small creature. No doubt she would have rather devoured it than attempted to make peace. But for now she seemed willing to try. A single tan arm slowly reached forward, a single finger extended, the dull nail making its way to the canine's nose, until it made contact with the cropped white fur in a gentle boop. Ilia was dead still. Then the puppy licked her and she yelped, scrambling back and giggling beneath the covers and pillows as Pyrrha failed to stifle her laughter.

"Ilia, dear I'm sorry...he was only licking you." Pyrrha snorted. "It's how they show affection."

A sudden knocking sounded from the wardrobe, just before it opened. Winter peeked her head through. "Am I interrupting?" She asked with a curious tilt.

"Ilia is frightened of puppies." Ruby explained.

"We're attempting to ease her worry." Pyrrha added.

"Successfully it seems." Winter teased.

"Baby steps." Pyrrha smiled apologetically. "Ilia, are you okay?" The pile of blankets shuddered in response.

"May I have some time alone with her?" Winter requested. "I'd like to speak of something important."

Pyrrha turned back to the pile to find blue eyes staring at the newcomer. She nodded. "Come Ruby." Pyrrha stood, picking up her basket. "I've some potions to brew, and you're far better with a knife than I." Ruby obeyed, leaping to her feet with the puppy cradled in her arms. Pyrrha hesitated
before sighing. "Though we should return out wayward canine first."

"Aw, I'll miss the little guy." Ruby pouted. "Ready to go home to your family?" She crooned at the ball of fur. She received a lick on the nose in response and giggled, following Pyrrha out the door.

With the room relatively emptied, Winter took in her surroundings. It was warm, almost uncomfortably so, in stark contrast to the cool basement. That was partly explained by the chimney, which cut through the floor on the right side of the room, and the makeshift insulation of blankets and hangings that coated the entire sloped ceiling. It felt like being inside a large tent. It was an oddly familiar experience, if more colorful. Templar tents were either clean white or camouflaged. Even with the camouflage Winter did not find them secure. Templars were never subtle. They expected and intended for the world to know where they were. They were intimidating, but foolish.

"Ilia, how do you fare?" Winter finally asked, stepping closer to the bed. The collection of pillows and blankets hiding the lamia looked rather cosy. Weiss had gone through a phase of piling spare linen atop herself when emotional. She had eventually outgrown it, but Winter would never forget the first time she caught Weiss swaddled in fine silks and cotton. Her heart ached for those times.

"I hate wolves." Ilia mumbled, poking her head out of the pile. "They howl and keep me awake at night. And one almost took my tail."

"And to think, one day you could wave you hand and send them flying away, like leaves on the wind." Winter noted.

"But I would set them on fire!" Ilia hissed, fangs briefly glinting in the lamplight before she bowed her head, downcast.

"That seems an extreme reaction." Winter arched her brow. "Wolves are an annoyance, but easily frightened away by a sufficient show of force."

"It's not by choice." Ilia complained.

"You have an affinity for fire then?" Winter inquired.

"I hate it." Ilia grumbled.

"You feel anger." Winter guessed.

"Frustration." Ilia corrected.

"Helplessness?" Winter asked.

"Fear." Ilia admitted.

"Of hurting others?" Winter questioned.

Ilia nodded rapidly. "I set our nest aflame." She croaked. "Now they think I hate them."

"What makes you say that?" Winter asked.

"I live in spite of them." Ilia replied.

"What do you mean?" Winter prodded.

"I am the last of us, the slowest, the weakest, the smallest." Ilia shrugged her way from the
blankets. "No matter how hard I try, I fail, time and again. They do not. They are greater. They catch their own food and grow larger and stronger." Slithering onto the floor, Ilia's gestures became more and more erratic, scales glinting in the lamplight, which steadily brightened. "As is the cycle. The strong survive, the weak falter and fall. Yet I do not. Mother fed me, mama saved me from sickness. I survived in spite of fate, and my sisters looked down upon me. Every day I followed, every day I fell, and every day they looked at me like a curse. So of course they think I hate them. My curse took root, my only strength lashing out at them, our den nearly lost to my loss of control!"

The lantern exploded, setting the table upon which it sat alight. Ilia yelped, hands held helplessly outward in shock, face screwing up in frustrated anger. Winter flung a hand toward the small blaze, sending a jet of frost to douse the flames. The room fell dark, the hissing of boiling liquid giving way to near silence, and the heavy breathing of one panicked lamia.

"Ilia." Winter spoke softly.

"I'm sorry." Ilia whispered in reply.

Winter could not see in the dark, but she could picture the expression Ilia would wear. She had seen it many times, on her fellow trainees, and in the mirror. "Ilia, it's okay. Do you see me?"

"A little." Ilia answered.

"Come to me." Winter held out her hands, waiting for the telltale slithering of scales across the floor, until the lamia shakily took hold of the offered limbs. "Magic is tied deeply to emotion. Anger, sadness, fear, it coaxes the forces that be from our souls." Clasping Ilia's hands together, Winter kept them covered with her own as she recalled a familiar sensation, the ache in her heart, the mourning and grief that ruled her early years, feeling the cold within ebb and flow to her palms.

"We cannot run from it. We cannot hide from it. But we can learn, in time…" Linking their fingers, Winter gently pulled their hands apart, the cryotic energy flaring into a pinprick of light. It steadily grew, illuminating Ilia's expression of wonder. "We can embrace it, for we are the same."

"I do not know how." Ilia's eyes shined in the mana glow, the thick blue catching the light beautifully.

"Not yet, but in time, if you'll accept my assistance." Winter slowly withdrew her touch, willing the orb to remain within the lamia's grasp, slowly lessening her influence upon the energy. It flickered and dimmed, Ilia's fingers twitching as her body reacted to the pull, until it stabilized, much to her glee, sharp teeth showing in a wide grin.

"It feels…" Ilia's grin flickered as the orb grew. "Sad." Small flecks appeared within the orb, the barest hint of a snowflake, until suddenly the light went out. "Oh...aw."

Winter chuckled, conjuring a ball of flame in her palm, revealing the adorable pout once more. "You did well, but focus is not something that comes naturally. It will take time, and practice."

Ilia clenched her hands into fists, flexing her fingers as the alien sensation lingered, like the sting of a slap but devoid of pain. "Please, help me."

Winter smiled. "It would be my pleasure."

It only ever got worse for Weiss. The feeling of entrapment, the strangulation of puppet strings wound tightly around her psyche, even the good nights brought subtler but still terrifying visions. One vision depicted her own sister, desiccated yet still living, a husk from consumption, the
coppery taste of what little blood she provided rich and delectable. Phantom joys thrummed through Weiss' veins in spite of the horror she felt at her idol reduced to such a state, at her own hand no less.

Another saw Ruby in her bed, nude and bloodstained, punctures littering her form and oozing their vital essence into the ivory sheets as Weiss' tongue chased the running streams. The adoration she felt for the summon seemed a betrayal, in so many ways. Her violation of such innocence sickened her, yet it hardly held a candle to the greatest farce presented.

Chains clinked and groaned, Weiss' wrists straining against the harsh metal bonds, bare knees chafing against the harsh ground. The leather collar around her neck constricted her breath, heavy and coursing with binding magic, it weighed upon her soul like an anchor, preventing it from reaching out to the forces beyond. It grounded her to the tragedy before her.

Her lover, her partner, her protector - Yang, daughter of the Dragon God of Fire, shivering and freezing in front of her. The sigils upon her own bindings gradually turned her form to ice, bronzed skin paling, dull red eyes pained in their anguish. Such was her fate, to be tortured and destroyed for Weiss' viewing, turned to ash, torn to cosmic cinders, forever drowned in an endless void. The visions had changed, yet they remained the same. The brightest star of her life, snuffed out like a candle. And there was never a damn thing Weiss could do to stop it.

"The depths of human depravity will never cease to sadden me." Came a female voice, mournful yet thick with amusement.

Weiss flinched, a strange awareness overcoming her. Time seemed to stand still. Yang's pained visage was quite literally frozen before her, not a lock of hair budging. Even her own chains seemed to lack weight as she shifted. Confused and overwhelmed, she felt a sob well within her throat, fresh tears blurring her vision, nearly obscuring the feet that silently padded before her. They were black clawed, yet human. The sight drew her gaze upward, past the hem of a black hakama, and the kimono beneath, into a disturbingly familiar face.

"Blake?" Weiss whispered in shock. Glowing golden eyes flared as the being knelt, a smile on her face that inspired nostalgia.

"No my dear, though it pleases me that she still honors her mother's visage." The woman spoke. "Mother?" Weiss made to wipe her tears, only for the chains to prevent her from reaching her face. She huffed, remembering her predicament, before lurching forward. The floor lacked notable texture, visibility or temperature. It became evident that the floor was not really a floor at all, but an abyss, a void, not dark but simply devoid of anything. A sense of extreme vertigo overtook her and she shut her eyes tight with a whimper.

"There, there dear, you are safe in my domain." The being crooned, gentle hands cupping Weiss' cheeks. She opened her eyes to peer into gold once more. Clear of tears she noted those eyes seemed softer than Blake's, but no less brilliant. "You have nothing to fear from me. I come to offer council."

"But why?" Weiss asked. "What are you?"

Coy laughter echoed around her. The void exploded into light. It was blinding, but not at all painful. "You mingle and mate with my kind, and so you gain my favor." The woman continued. "I am Kali, Goddess of Dreams." The light faded, just barely, as a new world formed around her. A sky, vibrant and blue, lush with clouds. A forest, verdant and glowing, teaming with all the sounds of life.
Grass licked at Weiss' skin, pressing into her body like a thousand fingertips. She felt a surge of joy at the sheer beauty before her, until a flash of pale skin sent a pang through her system. "Arg! Where are my clothes?!" She screeched, much to the amusement of the goddess. She turned her glare toward the laughter, only to meet the sight of a voluptuous beauty lounging bare in the sunshine, mirth in her eyes, golden piercings in her large feline ears gleaming. She averted her gaze with a fierce blush and huffed. "Blake put you up to this, didn't she?"

"You're a sharp one, as my darling daughter claimed." Kali chuckled. "Regardless, I would have thought you'd prefer this state. Your lover certainly does." The rich, motherly tone turned to a familiar purr.

Weiss stared back in surprise to find Kali had turned herself into the spitting image of Yang, grinning and glowing almost identical. It sent a shiver down Weiss' spine. She looked away once more, wrapping her arms around her legs. "Please do not mock her." She wavered, the image of Yang chained and freezing appearing in her mind, or so she thought.

"Weiss, she isn't real, none of this is." Kali noted, despite the tragic figure before her, so grey in the presence of the greenery. Weiss shut her eyes to block it out, shaking the thought from her head and attempting to replace it with something… "Now this is a cute one. Thoughts of motherhood I take it?" The goddess wondered.

Weiss opened her eyes to behold a young girl with brown hair, chasing after a rabbit. She smiled, shaking her head. "Of what I wish to protect. My duty in life...and death, it seems." She balled her toes, feeling the grass and dirt between them. It was an odd sensation, one she had rarely experienced. It was unbefitting of a lady, but of a huntress? "May I be clothed again?"

"You may do as you wish Weiss." Kali replied. "Your dreams are your reality. This paradise exists as a canvas for the soul, painting pictures vivid in memory and emotion."

Weiss hummed, staring at her feet. She thought of the grass dying, browning under harsh sunlight, before growing full of life once more. The world around her took on hues of tan and green, varying in vibrancy. Roots grew thick, the canopy dense, deer and elk and wolves frolicking in the shrubbery, gathering peacefully to drink at a picturesque lake, water gleaming in the sunlight. In the distance, lounging on the golden shore, lay Weiss' own goddess, bronzed and beautiful, shining brighter than all around her.

"You have captured the Heart of the Sun Weiss." Kali stated. "Not a flame in this realm will touch you."

Weiss had not even noticed herself standing, nor the familiar leather that wrapped her body. She turned to Kali and could not help but smile. "She saved me, when I could have fallen so very far."

"And you her, as a certain witch did my daughter, so many years ago." Kali added.

"Yet every night I dream of losing myself, of losing her to my depravity, to my past and future." Weiss sighed.

"If I may spoil a great mystery of the universe, fate is an abstract concept." Kali noted. "There is no future, only the past. What happens is, and will always be inconceivable. Only the most powerful of beings can even begin to guide the future, and they are rarely inclined to do so. Your dreams are merely that."

"And what if they come to pass regardless?" Weiss asked.
"If you flee from fears, they will follow you no matter the path." Kali warned. "Fate is humanity's vision of probability. Even prophecy relies on sheer chance. As you humans say, even a broken clock is right twice a day."

"I should be better than this." Weiss slumped. "I never subscribed to these fears in the past, but these dreams, these nightmares are so vivid. My heart breaks and my fear grows."

"Vampiric souls often spend their waning days tortured in this realm." Kali explained. "Trauma extracts a heavy toll. The price of immortality is dire, however you…" Kali cupped her cheek, caressing her in that nostalgic fashion once more. "Your soul burns bright and strong...fortunate, and extremely rare but not unheard of. Your bond may run deeper than either of you realize."

"We are so bonded already?" Weiss asked.

"You invited Yang within you willingly, pleaded for her warmth, and she gave all that she could muster to protect you from yourself, but you have closed your essence, wrapped in such fears and sadness that even your love cannot reach out to her." Kali interpreted. "You must find peace within yourself, let your bondmate in, lest your strength wane, and with it your reason and very sanity."

"Is it so dangerous?" Weiss questioned.

"Human souls are fragile things, even more so minds." Kali observed. "The strain of vampirism breaks so many, even purebloods, such as your sire."

Weiss shuddered as Kali's eyes brought memories of much colder, hungrier irises. She grit her teeth and forced them away. "I will never become like her."

"You won't, so long as you stop fighting what you are and face the reality in which you live, instead of obsessing over these figments of fiction." Kali advised. "You're worse than my daughter's books."

"Ugh...my temper has offended her, I fear." Weiss groaned.

"Oh shush." Kali laughed. "You would have to do so much more to offend my kitten. Blake is merely in a precarious predicament of her own. Her bondmate has inflicted many stresses upon her, stresses she has no true familiarity or knowledge of how to cope with. You just happened to point your blade at one of them."

With a sudden flurry of movement, the lamia in question burst from the forest, scattering several creatures in her wake. It turned its bright eyed gaze toward the pair. Weiss could not help but flinch, hand grasping for the hilt of a sword that had not existed before that moment.

"Beautiful creatures, truly." Kali crooned.

"If you say so." Weiss cringed, as the creature slithered into the water and dove beneath.

"Everything has beauty, should you be willing to look past your nose." Kali booped the vampire on her nose.

The sheer absurdity of the situation had ceased to phase Weiss by now. "I have to look past a lot more than that to find those things...ugh." She shuddered. "To think I used to like snakes."

"I've always found human phobias fascinating." Kali mused. "So much of life is spent avoiding that which causes so little harm, if any at all." She chuckled. "Think of all the things you could accomplish if petty fear did not rule you."
"My species would have died out long ago without such phobias." Weiss countered.

"Fear provokes ignorance." Kali refocused. "Even now you fear what you are capable of, and so drive yourself into misery, when the answer to your nightmares is obvious."

"The obvious answer?" Weiss raised her brow. "My death would avoid so much of it, yet cause so much more. I feel trapped in my own existence."

"I have watched your dreams for many years dear, and not once have you allowed yourself to falter." Kali noted.

"Because in the past my difficulties have stemmed from external circumstances." Weiss explained. "My mother died, my sister left, what I desired for myself was considered heresy for my sect. I could confront these, or otherwise bypass them. But this? This uncertainty? I cannot avoid the future, set in stone or no. I cannot fight this Kali, and that scares me."

"The future is immaterial Weiss, ever changing, ever flowing." Kali continued. "There is no avoiding the passage of time, but you can avoid losing yourself. Or do you truly believe all vampires become mindless, blood-sucking parasites?"

"My mother didn't." Weiss frowned.

"Nor does your mentor, or else she wouldn't have chanced it." Kali suggested.

"What would she know?" Weiss asked. "She's never mentioned vampires before. She probably doesn't even know any."

"Oh, she hasn't?" Kali questioned.

"No, she has..." Weiss faltered, searching her mind for a distant memory, something about research, a scholar...

"Sweet dreams Weiss," Kali bid.

Weiss turned to reply, only to find Kali gone, and with her, the world around. She felt the same sense of vertigo once more, until she opened her eyes and felt warmth surrounding her, strong arms wrapped around her midriff. "Yang?"

"You okay snowball?" Yang asked.

Weiss took a deep, shaky breath, wiping at the dampness beneath her eyes. "I don't know..." She shifted, turning around to face glowing lilac eyes, eyes filled with concern. She smiled, planting a kiss on heated lips. "I need to visit Glynda."

"Now, or..." Yang asked.

"Soon." Weiss replied. "For now...let us sit by the fire for a while."
The smell of fresh melted butter filled the air, mingling with the scent of floral tea and rich coffee, all accompanied by the sound of sizzling. Glynda's kitchen had rarely been so filled over the years, with barely more than a guest or two ever gracing its floor. The witch herself sat at the table for a change, as Ren managed the current course for breakfast. On the menu were pancakes, specifically for Nora, who had not joined them that morning.

"I thought cakes were larger than that." Ilia noted, hovering over the cooking area in wonder. "Will it grow?" The prospect of a new food had enamored her to Ren immediately, though she still flinched when he made sudden moves. Fortunately he rarely did so.

"A cake is a broad definition." Ren explained. "Form rarely matters. Ingredients are the most common relation."

"So anything can be a cake if it contains those ingredients?" Ilia asked.

"Not necessarily, but often times yes." Ren replied.

"Unless it's a slice." Pyrrha chimed in from the table, her plate already cleared of her hearty breakfast.

"I believe a slice is a layercake." Ren speculated.

Pyrrha took a long sip of tea before responding. "People are welcome to think that."

"What is a slice?" Ilia inquired.

"Unhealthy," Glynda retorted. "Let Ren work Ilia, a watched pot never boils."

"But I'm hungry." Ilia groaned.

"Eat an apple." Glynda suggested.

"I don't want an apple..." Ilia pouted.

"Then you're not hungry." Glynda stated. Ilia grumbled and slithered back to her chair.

Dew stared blankly at the fruit bowl before her, coffee cooling in her hands. She was no longer phased by the menagerie surrounding her. It concerned Glynda to see her so dead to the world, but at the very least she was up and about now. Blake, meanwhile, had decided to visit Velvet, another excuse to leave the house Glynda suspected, though she had meant to pay a visit herself, so at least some good was coming from it. The back door opened, Dew flinching slightly, a move only noticed by Glynda. Violet eyes flicked to the doorway before calming and dropping back to her food. It was only Ruby entering, having tended the gardens, which were protected from the winter cold by a series of wards.

"He's back!" Ruby cheered as the patter of little paws followed her in, the tiny puppy panting happily by the summon's feet.

Pyrrha huffed a chuckle. "Well, I suppose we can visit the puppies again."
"Wash his paws before letting him run about." Glynda instructed. "And tell Nora breakfast is almost ready."

Ruby scooped the puppy into her arms as she ran to obey. "Yes ma'am!"

"Are you certain Ilia can handle these?" Ren asked, flipping a third wide pancake onto a plate, spooning a dollop of butter on top for good measure. "I am unfamiliar with lamia digestion."

Ilia looked pleadingly to her mother, a small pout on her lips threatening to quiver. Glynda grinned. "Thus far we have had no incidents. I see no issue with the occasional foray." Ilia's expression lit up as Ren brought the plate over, the contents lightly steaming, butter forming a molten pool in the middle. Everyone paused to watch as Ilia stared at the plate in wonder, her slitted eyes dilating until they were barely rimmed in blue. A forked grey tongue flicked out curiously. "Ilia, what do you say?" Glynda chastised.

Ilia blinked, snapped from her daze. She looked to Ren and bowed her head. "Thank you."

"It was my pleasure." Ren smiled, holding a boat of syrup aloft. "Syrup?"

"Just a drizzle." Glynda answered for her daughter. Ren obliged, leaving trails of warm syrup across the pancakes' surface, setting the boat aside as he returned to flip the next batch. "Knife and fork." The witch instructed. Ilia froze mid grab, barely hesitating to snatch up the implements. She stabbed the fork through the surface, clumsily sawed a large chunk free, and barely avoided devouring the fork as she shoveled the dripping meal into her maw. Dew watched in detached wonder as the giant reptile ate breakfast by her side.

"Nora says she isn't hungry." Ruby spoke from the doorway. "I think she's angry. Did I do something?"

"No Ruby, Nora is just…" Pyrrha hesitated, searching for the words. "How do I put this…"

"Nora wants to confront the spriggans." Ren explained. "I am against it."

"Would it not bring Nora peace?" Pyrrha asked.

"Not in her current state." Ren replied. "She is angry and hurting, confronting the reality of her existence. If she faces them now she may very well do something she regrets."

"I would rather avoid an incident with the wildlife." Glynda interjected.

"It goes beyond that." Ren continued. "Spriggan kind are our family. We are kin to them. This act of negligence has brought harm to us, and will not be overlooked. I wish to wait for them to approach us of their own free will. It would be more meaningful to us, far more so to Nora."

"I must admit, I have not studied spriggans very deeply." Pyrrha noted. "I never expected to face them in combat…"

"Nor should you." Ren nodded. "You are kind and caring. You do not pose a threat to their home." He flipped another stack of pancakes onto a plate. "Those who do can never prepare for nature's wrath." He slid the plate in front of Pyrrha with a smile, along with a jug of blood red syrup. "And so the forests are kept well fed."

Pyrrha eyed the jug with worry. Glynda merely looked amused, which meant she knew something Pyrrha did not…as per usual. A crash and a curse sounded from the living room, followed by steady thumping. The group turned to behold Nora catch herself on the doorway, squinting into the
light through clouded eyes.

"I'm going!" Nora shouted. "And you can't stop me!"

"Nora, your clothes!" Ruby stepped around her, holding out her tunic.

"Let them speak to me as an equal or not at all." Nora decreed as she stepped forward, directly into the table. "Argh, sorry everyone. You all smell nice this morning."

"Nora, please." Ren sighed.

"I've waited long enough." Nora declared. "I'm not getting any blinder, I'm not getting any better. I'll crawl there if I need to!"

"We cannot force a confrontation-" Ren cautioned.

"Watch me!" Nora yelled. "Or don't! Keep making pancakes so I have something to eat after I give 'em what for!" She fumbled her way along the wall, making her way to the door. "Stupid blindness, stupid eyes. Oh hey Glynda, sorry about your table."

"Just don't scar the town with your nudity." Glynda deadpanned.

"If anything I'll put a pep in their steps!" Nora grinned, fumbling with the door.

Ren stepped over, laying a hand over Nora's as it gripped the handle. "Nora-"

"Please don't Ren." Nora croaked, looking vaguely in the direction of his eyes. "I can't stand this anymore. We deserve better. They're supposed to be family."

"You and I both know things are rarely as they are supposed to be." Ren reached up to cup her cheek, wiping away the tears running down it. "I worry for you."

"I know Renny, but sometimes I gotta' jump, or I'll never be able to sit still." Nora leaned into the contact.

"And then I have to tend to your skinned knees." Ren responded.

"And give me that look that says I told you so." Nora added.

"How can I give you the look if you can't see it?" Ren asked.

"I can feel it, when I'm laying there wondering what went wrong." Nora answered. "It's like a warmth on my soul."

Ren sighed, slumping in defeat. "I need to finish breakfast."

"I can escort her." Pyrrha volunteered, standing. "I uh, don't really eat much in the morning anyway."

"You'd skip Renny's pancakes for little old me?" Nora smirked.

"For the sake of our friendship." Pyrrha confirmed.

"Aw, see Ren, I can make friends!" Nora cheered.

"Hmm, occasionally." Ren allowed.
"Shall I follow?" Ruby asked.

"We should be fine Ruby." Pyrrha declined. "You can have my breakfast for me, okay?"

"Yes mistress!" Ruby exclaimed.

"Love you Renny, be right back." Nora pecked him on the lips and dashed out the door.

Pyrrha sighed. "Ruby, please hand me the smock."

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"How's your head feeling?" Nora asked as they walked. She was thankfully clothed, if only in her barely modest smock.

"It aches at times, but normally I feel quite fine." Pyrrha replied, wary of Nora's balance. The werewolf walked mostly unassisted, her perception of the world being acute enough to keep her on track, but she still staggered and stumbled over sudden changes in elevation. "It should pass in time."

"I remember the first time I got shot." Nora smiled. "I didn't even know it either, until I got all light headed from losing blood. Good thing silver bullets usually leave clean wounds."

"Blood loss does have a way of making itself known." Pyrrha chuckled, eyeing Nora's dirty feet as they narrowly missed yet another stray root. How she ignored the cold clawing at her skin was beyond understanding. "Are you not cold?"

"Hot blooded!" Nora shook her head. "It's actually really pleasant right now. Think of me like...uh...a husky! Yeah, a redheaded husky!"

"You're not nearly hairy enough." Pyrrha noted. "In your current form at least."

"Because Renny keeps me trimmed!" Nora announced.

"How attentive of him..." Pyrrha sighed.

"I've never been really good at all the gentle human stuff." Nora admitted.

"Do you consider yourself...other than human?" Pyrrha asked.

"Well, kinda', but also not really." Nora shrugged, missing yet another knot in the road. "I'm human, but I haven't lived as one since I was a kid. I've been a werewolf as long as I can remember. The only parents I ever had were spriggans, and the only full human I've really spent much time with is Ozpin, and he's more of...and uncle I guess. A nice uncle, but kinda' distant most of the time." She began walking backwards, staring vacantly in Pyrrha's general direction. "At what point do I stop being human and start being formerly human? I mean, I don't really understand human society that well. It's too stiff and rigid and scared of being free. Every time I'm immersed in it I feel stifled. I hate clothes, perfumes hurt my nose, and shoe-wah!" She finally tripped over a root. Pyrrha lunged forward, only to grasp the scruff of the smock. It tore away effortlessly. "You know, if you wanted me naked again, all you had to do was ask." Nora giggled from the ground.

Pyrrha was growing to appreciate Nora, but her nudity was taking far more adjustment. "I envy you at times Nora." She sighed, reaching a hand for Nora to take before realizing yet again that Nora would likely not be able to see it. She clicked her gloved fingers to help.

"Oh?" Nora grinned. "Ya' know it's not that hard to become a werewolf." She took the offered limb
and allowed herself to be pulled to her feet. "I've never sired someone before, but I think you'd make a great packmate!"

"Thank you Nora, but that's not what I meant." Pyrrha declined the offer. "Your confidence and lack of modesty is something admirable. Due to my upbringing I formed a...somewhat childish view of the naked form."

"Aren't you from Mistral?" Nora asked.

"I am." Pyrrha confirmed.

"But your religion is like...sex and fighting and more sex and marriage and sex to celebrate the marriage, then you fight together and have more sex!" Nora rambled.

"This reality has not escaped my notice." Pyrrha groaned.

"Were you offered to celibate monks and raised to be pure?" Nora asked.

"No." Pyrrha replied.

"Chased off because your skin was too light and raised by fish?" Nora suggested.

"No, but there is a small element of truth there..." Pyrrha allowed.

"Fish?" Nora inquired.

"My skin was considered oddly pale." Pyrrha elaborated. "My parents were advised to bathe me in olive oil beneath each full moon."

"Do you still do it?" Nora asked.

"Sometimes I use olive lotion, but otherwise no." Pyrrha answered.

"Wait, isn't olive oil a sex thing?" Nora quirked her brow.

"In certain situations, but not always." Pyrrha explained. "Gladiators and participants in seasonal games oil themselves beforehand as well. Some of the more remote parts of Mistral still use olive oil in lieu of soap when bathing."

"Were your parents like, exiled or something?" Nora asked.

"No, Nora, they were devout Mistrali warriors, who raised me the same as any other." Pyrrha responded. "I just happened to dislike the sheer..." Pyrrha grimaced, searching for the right word. "...intensity of our culture. It...made me feel uncomfortable, being around so many people, doing such intimate things. I saw it as overly stifling, and sought to escape it whenever possible."

"But intimacy is wonderful!" Nora exclaimed. "People are beautiful and being around and with each other is one of the greatest things we can do!"

"Perhaps it is, but to my younger self, I was confused and scared, and just wanted to be alone sometimes." Pyrrha lamented. "But my parents and everyone around me thought that was wrong, that something was wrong with me. So that which is considered special and beautiful to them to you, became something hellish to me, to the point that I left my home and my country to pursue a life dedicated to what was in my eyes a more noble cause."

"But you still envy me?" Nora tilted her head.
"I do, for you are happy in such acts, you crave and value them as a normal individual." Pyrrha nodded. "I do not. The thought leaves an ache in my heart, fear in my soul...it...I had a friend, who showed interest in me. When I rejected them I fear I hurt them on such a level that they became careless...they passed soon after."

"That's...really heavy Pyr." Nora noted.

"Yes, well it does weigh upon me at times." Pyrrha agreed.

"You know, there was a time when I took my job real serious." Nora said.

"Oh?" Pyrrha asked.

"I mean, I wasn't stoic about it and all." Nora chuckled. "It's just that I really wanted to save everyone, and when I couldn't, it hurt a lot."

"I understand." Pyrrha comiserated.

"But Renny said something that really stuck with me." Nora continued. "He says Ozpin told him. He's just being modest, he's always like that."

"He's certainly a man of few words." Pyrrha interjected.

"And those few words are always important to me." Nora nodded before going on. "He said to me Nora, we can't save the world, but we can save who we can."

"Wise words, but the pain of failure shall always weigh upon us." Pyrrha countered.

"Our souls are stubborn like that." Nora allowed. "Luckily Renny helps distract me, and when Renny can't help, I usually just go for a run. Running helps me find peace. Do you run?"

"During my morning exercises, yes...it doesn't bring me peace." Pyrrha frowned.

"What does?" Nora asked.

Pyrrha remained silent, contemplating the things that had brought her peace over time, and how they had lost their effectiveness, driving her to other methods. Finally she landed on Ruby's effect on her...

"I think we're here." Nora announced.

"Hmm?" Pyrrha asked.

"I can smell the lilies." Nora explained.

"Are they so strong?" Pyrrha inquired.

"To me they smell of home." Nora nodded. She and Pyrrha walked through the trees, emerging by the frozen lake. "Even now I can feel them, like a weak pulse beneath my feet...it's like, you know, someone's heartbeat. Everything in nature shares one."

"I was unaware werewolves shared such a bond." Pyrrha noted.

"They don't, not naturally." Nora corrected. "Our connection was a gift, from our saviors, our family, deep in the forest of northern Mistral."
"They can gift you such a power?" Pyrrha inquired.

"It's not so much a power...more like...we all have a soul, but some have a strong bond to the void." Nora tried to explain. "It's where we go to dream, but spriggans are born of the soil, fueled by the sun. The world is their void, and with enough time and love, anyone can form a bond." Nora took Pyrrha's hand, pulling her closer to the ground as they crouched, clearing away snow to hold it to the soil. "We spent our childhoods among them, drinking their sap, bathing in their luminescence. They loved us, and we loved them. Sometimes if I really reach for them, I can see a glimmer of their essence, even so far from home. I can feel their gaze."

Pyrrha tried to concentrate on what Nora wanted her to feel. At first there was only the cold of the ground and the warmth of the werewolf's hand, but their pulses entwined until one. A gentle, slow thrum became evident, shocking in its immensity. "Oh." Pyrrha gasped.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Nora beamed.

"It's vast!" Pyrrha found herself struck by a sense of vertigo. Nora released her hand in time for her to fall back onto her rear, dizzy and disoriented.

"I've shown kids before, but never an adult." Nora spoke. "How does it feel?"

"Like...like peering over the edge of a mountain, only for the ground to vanish beneath me." Pyrrha struggled to put the feeling into words.

"Kids haven't learned the way of the world yet." Nora mused. "They just go with the flow and let their minds go where nature takes them. It makes sense that you'd be so disoriented. You've spent your whole life thinking the ground is solid and simple, but now you see, you see what I see, and that's just a hint of what spriggans see in this world!"

"So you see, like this?" Pyrrha asked.

"A little." Nora shrugged. "Enough to walk, but I'm not used to it...maybe I never will be, but I've got it much better than humans in my place."

"It's..." Pyrrha looked at her hands, still slightly shaking. "...disconcerting how ignorant I am of the world's natural forces."

"Most humans are too busy trying to get by to ever care." Nora observed. "What with Grimm and bandits and taxes, it's as much as any individual can do to make it through the day. At least that individual isn't likely to do harm to the world in the process." She sat beside Pyrrha, the pair looking over the lake.

"Is the lake alive?" Pyrrha inquired.

"It has living things in it, yeah." Nora replied. "But water isn't alive, so no...good at conducting though!"

"I sense a story behind that." Pyrrha guessed.

"Play your cards right, maybe I'll tell you someday." Nora winked. They shared a laugh.

"Can they see us, right now?" Pyrrha asked.

"Always really...it's why I was so confused when I came here." Nora slumped. "They could see me, they knew who I was, why didn't they speak to me? What did I do? What have I done?"
"Could it perhaps be something we did?" Pyrrha suggested.

"I asked Glynda, she said the spriggans on this isle have been secluded for decades." Nora answered. "Maybe they just didn't want to be disturbed. The humans of Patch tent to keep to the coasts."

"Is it truly unusual for them to be so private?" Pyrrha pressed.

"It depends on what's happened." Nora explained. "Atlesian spriggans are...cold, and angry. The Templars treat them like an infestation, burning their homes, poisoning their lands, because they get in the way of 'progress,' and the people suffer for it, because they can't risk going into the forests for fear of reprisals, which feeds into the narrative the Templars push and justify it all!" Nora grew louder and more heated throughout the rant. Pyrrha took her hand to calm her down. Nora returned a painful but restrained grip. "When Renny and I traveled there, there was so much pain, but even they met us with open arms, because they knew us as kin. What happened to Patch that made things so different here?"

"The blame lies with me, little one." A stern voice replied. Nora tensed, her hand squeezing hard again. Pyrrha turned to see Amber, the spriggan matron, standing not far behind. "My soul is not so jaded as to ignore my failings. No matter my intent, I am but one individual, leading her pack…" She walked past the pair, toward the water's edge. "Let me tell you a story, short in your tongue, yet long in my heart, of a woman. She was long tortured by the realities of this world, wife to a murdered husband, mother to a stolen daughter, who fought until her fingers were raw and her lungs were dry. As the last of her foes fell, and the blood of her kin stained her very soul...this woman found no justice of her own. No peace. No absolution."

Pyrrha had never met a spriggan before. Even in the rarest of Mistrali rituals they were seldom contacted. She found them intimidating yet beautiful, transcending description. Even the books, of which Port had given her many, could not begin to prepare her for the encounter.

"In her pain, she sought seclusion from this cruel world, from all that had harmed her." Amber continued. "She traveled until naught by the sea and memory surrounded her, to live out her final days in peace…" The spriggan reached out to Nora, who blinked blearily at her, tight lipped and stock still, eventually standing to approach. "But loss and pain had broken her. She found no solace in solitude. The agony of her loss screamed and screamed until she could bear it no more. She walked into the forest, searching for her final rest…" Nora allowed Amber to take both hands in her own, and the matron knelt before her. "She walked, bare and unfettered. The forest beheld as she cast aside her mortal bonds, prostrating herself before certain death...only for the forest to offer her a second chance...to live among the trees, to love and be loved, by a family who understood her loss, who felt her pain, and wished only to ease it..." Sap fell from the spriggan's eyes like tears, and Nora found herself similarly moved. "At pløe er en Spriggans kald, men alligevel har min natur gjort mig slidte og uagttsom. Magnhild, jeg beder om tilgivelse, af dig, din kæreste, og din kammerat...Jeg har aldrig ønsket skade på din art."

Nora collapsed to her knees, wrapping the matron in a hug that was returned tightly, the werewolf shaking with gently sobs. Pyrrha watched the two comfort one another, the spriggan starting to glow, golden veins illuminating beneath bark-like skin, until she slumped. Nora gasped, shaking her head rapidly before looking to Pyrrha. The huntress took a moment to realize her friend's eyes were no longer clouded. Amber lurched, retching into the lake, expelling a silvery substance that melted through the ice.

"I must admit, I have never done such a thing before..." Amber struggled. "Death's Tears are disagreeable."
"Will you be okay?" Pyrrha asked, crouching beside the spriggan.

"In time." Amber replied. "Huntress, for now…" She reached for Pyrrha's hand, grabbing it before she could reach. Pyrrha felt herself struck by a harsh warmth flowing through her system, waves cascading down toward her injured leg. There the feeling intensified before warmly receding. "Your bravery was admirable, huntress, and you have never inflicted harm upon us. For that we are thankful."

Pyrrha allowed herself to sit as the shock of rejuvenation sent shudders through her body. Unable to rationalize the combination of drain and adrenaline flowing through her veins, she fell back, staring blearily into the sky. The aching pain that had plagued her leg since the injury had disappeared entirely. She wondered if such a power could be taught.

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