A Botanical Study of Love

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by Equinurnae

Summary

Set a couple of weeks after The Sun and the Sea God, things have settled down around Beacon. Okay, except for Scarlet. Scarlet's being a bit of a dick, to be honest. Sage is trying to help, but it turns out Sage isn't the best at helping, and of course, things can only get worse.
Unbeknown to most, Scarlet David was largely a creature of habit.

He almost always woke up between the hours of seven and eight, after Sage but before Neptune and Sun, and the first thing he did when he opened his eyes was groan. Now, this was usually because of one of three reasons:

The first, and most common – he simply did not want to get up. The morning was plain evil, and Scarlet was fiercely jealous of anyone who could sleep in. Apparently, his body did not allow him such luxuries. Even with the worst of hangovers, he would always be awake by eight.

Speaking of hangovers, alcohol was the second reason he woke up with a groan, usually exacerbating the first reason.

The third reason hadn’t become a problem until recently, and Scarlet was growing increasingly irritated by it. Although the dorms at Beacon were bigger than the dorms back at Haven, the four of them were still only in one room, so Scarlet was painfully aware of Sun and Neptune moaning and whispering to each other under the cover of Neptune’s sheets, the two of them occasionally giggling like a pair of horny schoolboys.

Scarlet groaned again, loudly this time, so his teammates could hear his displeasure. There came some rustling from Neptune’s bed, and then Sun poked his head out the covers.

“Yes?” the faunus asked. His blond hair was messy beyond dishevelment, and despite the time of morning, his eyes were bright and grinning.

“Could you suck Neptune off a bit quieter, please?” Scarlet deadpanned. “I’m trying to sleep.”

Neptune squeaked, and Sun frowned. “You have a… very active imagination there, Scar.”

“Well if you weren’t fucking, what were you doing?” he snapped.

The faunus stuck his tongue out. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

Scarlet growled, getting up angrily. He muttered all the way to the bathroom, muttered all the while in the shower and muttered as he got dressed, so much so that Neptune also emerged from the covers, his expression anxious.

“Are you okay, dude?” the blue-haired boy asked. “You seem a little… grumpy.”

“It’s morning.”

“Yeah, but…” Neptune struggled to find the words.

“You’ve been worse than usual, lately,” Sun filled in.

“Yeah, that.”

Scarlet snorted. “Care to guess why?”
“See, now that’s just rude.” Sun pouted.

“Whatever.” Scarlet shook his head, leaving. “See you two idiots in history.”

As he closed the door behind him he heard the muffled sound of Sun going ‘Oh shit, the paper!’, and Scarlet chuckled quietly to himself. Had he been too rude to them this morning? He had found himself in a lot of bad moods recently, although he couldn’t imagine why. Neptune and Sun were finally together, no one was missing or had been kidnapped, and they were on top of training for the Vytal festival, so what was it? Why was he feeling so… down?

Scarlet sat down next to Sage feeling slightly better, but not really.

“Did you wake up on the wrong side of bed again?” Sage asked.

He snorted. “I wish.”

Sage frowned, but said nothing.

“Good morning!” Yang sang, sliding up next to him. “How’s my scarlet fairy feeling today?”

“I thought I asked you to stop calling me that?” Scarlet said.

“But you fly,” Yang protested. “Like Tinkerbelle!”

Usually, Scarlet would have laughed at this point. Instead, he growled.

Yang pulled a face. “Okay then.”

She slid back down the table to join her sister, glancing back at him worriedly.

Sage shook his head. “That was mean, Scar.”

“I know.”

Sage hesitated. “You know, if you ever want to talk…”

Scarlet cut him off. “You know how I feel about you reading my emotions, Sage,” he complained.

“… Sorry.”

“Whatever,” Scarlet dismissed, getting up just as he caught sight of Neptune and Sun. “See you in class.”

It wasn’t as if he wanted to avoid them, and it wasn’t as if he wanted to be rude, but… Recently, whenever he’d been around Neptune and Sun, Scarlet had felt… irritated. Every little thing just got on his nerves, and… he didn’t know why he was feeling this. Sage could have told him, but personally, Scarlet felt as if his emotions were his to figure out, not someone else’s.

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Sun glowered at Scarlet’s back as he sat down.

“What the hell’s his problem?” he asked.

“He’s…” Sage started to say, but stopped himself, biting his lip.

Neptune raised his eyebrow. “He’s… what?”
Sage shook his head. “Never mind.”

“It’s been two weeks, now,” said Sun. “Honestly, Scarlet needs to sort himself out before the Vytal festival, because his bitchery is throwing all of us off balance.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Sage, and he did.

Sage knew more than anyone else what was going on, whether he liked it or not. He couldn’t switch off his empathy – it didn’t work like that. He’d spent his entire life swamped in a sea of emotions, a thousand colours swallowing him whole, yet he’d learned to live with it. He could deal with it, now, and had even learned how to change people’s emotions for brief periods of time. One thing he could not do, however, was to fix things magically, even with the help of psychic dust.

What was worse – Scarlet didn’t even want to know that the gnawing, empty feeling in his stomach was simply jealousy – jealousy, caused by a surging, throbbing loneliness.

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“…all I’m saying is that all four of her ears are super cute,” Yang slurred, taking another shot.

“Are they fuzzy?” Nora asked. “You know, like how cats are fuzzy. Because, you know… she’s part cat.” The redhead mimed paws. “Meow.”

“I don’t know!” Yang cried, suddenly upset. “Blake won’t let me touch her cat ears, even though I promised I’d be really gentle.”

“You should touch them without her permission,” Nora giggled. “You know, while she’s sleeping.”

Yang perked up, taking another shot. “Yeah, great idea! I bet if I’m stealthy enough I can even nibble them.” Her smile fell, her face growing serious. “But which pair of ears do I nibble?”

“For Dust’s sake, will you stop going on about Blake!” Scarlet growled, glaring at the blonde. His pint of beer sat before him untouched, his golden reflection taunting him and his misery.

Yang’s eyes narrowed and she stood up, swaying slightly. “Listen here, princess,” she hissed, grabbing him by his collar. “I have had enough of your attitude…”

“Oh let him go, Yang,” Nora said. “We all know he’s only pissed because he has no one to fawn over like the rest of us.”

“That is not true!” Scarlet hissed, shoving Yang off him.

The blonde shook her head indignantly, sitting back down. “Then you’d better start acting like it’s not true.”

Yang glared at him, her eyes daring him to disagree even through the fog of alcohol. Scarlet couldn’t think of anything witty to say in reply, so he stormed off, fuming. Lonely? Him? So what if he wanted someone to cuddle with? That didn’t mean it was the reason he was so pissed off…

Did it?

No, of course it didn’t. When people were lonely they moped about, dejected and dripping with angst. Scarlet was willing to admit that he did quite a bit of moping, but he definitely wasn’t dejected, and he had proudly deemed himself angst-free three years ago. But…

A girlfriend would be nice.
Or a boyfriend. Anyone, really. He wasn’t picky. Okay, not anyone, per say, but the gist was still the same.

Huh. Maybe he was lonely?

His feelings were confusing, and they were pissing him off.

*Do you know who could help?* asked his inner voice. *Sage.*

“Fuck off,” Scarlet replied.

A woman he’d been passing gasped, looking very offended.

“Not you, I was talking to me,” Scarlet dismissed, carrying on with his sulk.

Of course Sage could have told him what he was feeling, but apart from being invasive, to Scarlet that felt like… cheating. He was confused for a reason, and that reason wanted him to sort out his emotions on his own –

*Oh my Dust.*

*What the hell am I thinking? I don't even make any sense!*

That was it – Scarlet was going crazy. For the sake of his sanity, he gave in. Tomorrow he would speak to Sage and figure this out once and for all.

Oh yeah, and he should probably apologise to Sun and Neptune, too.

Chapter End Notes

Hello everyone! Sorry this took a little longer to post than planned, I had a bit of writer’s block. It’s gone, now, so hopefully I’ll be able to update at least once a week, but I can’t make any promises. Anyway, what did you think of this new work? Comments and kudos would be amazing! ^^

(Don’t ask about the name of the series - I have no idea, either.)
Neptune was pretty sure he was dying inside. He was fairly confident Sun was dying inside, too, but then Sun was much more comfortable with awkwardness than he was, so he couldn’t be sure.

“Did you find this place alright?” asked Rhea.

“Yes, thank you,” Huang replied.

Neptune’s parents sat across from Sun’s parents, while Sun, Neptune and Yaya sat in the middle of them. Sun’s brothers were making aeroplane noises under the table, but no one paid them much attention. Occasionally, the noises would pause and one of the twins would hit Sun’s legs, to which Sun would kick them back. Then, the aeroplane noises would start again with renewed vigour (and irritation).

Mr and Mrs Vasilias were doing that thing adults do when they smile even though you know they’re screaming internally, and although Rhea’s smile was somewhat genuine, Neptune could tell from the tension in his father’s body language that Saturn was even more terrified of Sun’s parents than he had been of the White Fang, and that was saying something. Jin and Huang Wukong were also doing that fake smiling thing, although all four of them were trying their best to get along, for their children’s sakes.

The café they were in was on the roof of a Vacuan supermarket, and advertised itself as ‘the most authentic Vacuan food in Vale!’ They hadn’t actually tried any of the food yet, as they had ordered just a couple of minutes ago, but if the café’s cooking was anything like its décor, then Neptune had high hopes. Glowing crystals hung from wires overhead, mimicking the fierce Vacuan sun without any of that scorching heat. Traditional parasols protected each table from the light, and indigenous Vacuan fauna spilled over the pots and trellises that separated table from table.

Neptune smelled their food before he saw the waiter coming over, and he licked his lips.

“I am so hungry right now,” Sun said. He poked his brothers with his tail and the twins emerged from underneath the table just as the waiter set down their meals.

“Enjoy,” the waiter said, smiling.

Neptune smiled back and they dug in, using the food as an excuse to stop talking.

Rhea wrung her hands. “Well, isn’t this delicious?”


“Yes,” Huang filled in quickly. “This café’s wonderful! How ever did you hear of it?”

“I was shopping nearby a couple of days ago when it caught my eye,” said Rhea. “I’ve always wanted to try Vacuan cuisine.”

Saturn chuckled. “I’m not sure how authentic this is, though.”

Jin took a bite from his pastry. “Seems pretty authentic to me.”
“That’s good to hear,” said Rhea.

They lapsed back into silence. Huang grabbed Mara’s tail before he could dip it in his ice-cream, scolding him. Immediately, Cuja dipped his tail in his twin brother’s ice-cream out of protest, staring his mother square in the eyes as he did so. Huang sighed, and Saturn chuckled.

Yaya had been staring at Neptune’s mother for a while, and now spoke up:

“You’re very pretty, Mrs Vasilius,” she said politely.

Rhea seemed surprised at first, but then smiled warmly. “Well, I thank you for the compliment, but I don’t think I’m nearly as pretty as you.”

Yaya giggled, and Sun’s parents smiled. Neptune breathed a sigh of relief.

Sun poked him with his tail. “Told you it’d be fine,” he whispered, grinning.

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“I really should trust you more,” said Neptune.

Sun nodded. “You should. I am your wise and competent team leader – if I say there’s nothing to worry about, then there’s nothing to worry about.”

Neptune rubbed Sun’s hand. “Yeah.”

“Hey, want to hear what Blake told me this morning?” Sun asked.

Neptune frowned. “Only if it’s appropriate.”

“Yesterday night, Yang got back to their dorm drunk and tried to bite her ears.”

The blue-haired boy blinked. “Um… what?”

“I know, right?” Sun giggled. “Ruby had to intervene.”

Neptune rolled his eyes. “I really do wonder when Blake will catch on.”

The faunus snorted. “You should be worrying about when Ren will catch on, that’s what.” Sun grimaced. “I swear to Dust, that boy is even more oblivious than you were.”

Neptune glanced sideways at Sun. Sun stuck his tongue out at him.

“Want to bet?” Sun asked.

“On what?”

“On when Ren and Nora will get together.”

Neptune shook his head. “That’ll be too slow. We should bet on when Jaune and Pyrrha will get together.”

The faunus pouted. “I bet Ren and Nora will happen before Jaune and Pyrrha do.”

Neptune grinned. “Deal. But neither of us are allowed to interfere.”

Sun pondered this for a moment. “Loser has to take the other to ‘The Sea of Vale’.”
“You mean that fancy restaurant we had our first date at?” Neptune asked. “Okay then! It’s a win-win situation.”

Sun smirked. “Not if I order lobster.”

The blue-haired boy paled, clutching his wallet. “You monster.”

Just as they entered Beacon, they passed Scarlet. After a moment’s deliberation, the redhead came over to them.

“Hey guys,” he said.

“Hey, Scarlet,” said Neptune.

“Hi.” Sun scowled.

“How were your parents?” Scarlet asked carefully.

“Really good, actually!” Neptune replied.

“Polite, too,” added Sun.

Scarlet hesitated. “Listen, guys, err…” He scratched his head. “I’m… sorry I was so rude yesterday.”

Sun blinked. “No problem…”

“We all have our days,” said Neptune.

“Yeah.” Scarlet swallowed, glancing to Sun and Neptune’s clasped hands and sighing sadly. “Well, see you around.”

Sun waved. “See you…”

Scarlet left, and Neptune coughed. “Well that was weird.”

Sun blinked suspiciously. “Was it me, or did he seem a little… lovesick?”


“Well no, not lovesick, but…” Sun struggled to find the words. “Lonely, or something.”

Neptune ran a hand through his hair. “Well… actually, now that you mention it…”

Sun shrugged. “Whatever.”

“What, you’re just going to leave it?”

“Dude, I spent at least a year flirting with you and you didn’t notice. I don’t think either of us would be good matchmakers.”

The blue-haired boy winced. “Fair enough.”

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Quiet.

Sage breathed it in, revelling in it – peace and quiet.
At last.

He felt the soil around the base of his bonsai, frowning. Almost dry. He watered it gently, making sure not to disturb the soil. Then, he sprinkled some fertiliser around the tree, humming to himself as he did so. The tree was growing healthily, and was almost reaching twelve inches. It was time to trim it. Biting his lip to concentrate, he poised with his secateurs and –

The door slammed open.

“Sage, I need your help,” said Scarlet.

Sage jumped but managed to snatch the secateurs out of the way before he could damage the bonsai. He froze, eyes wide, and waited for his heartbeat to slow down.

Scarlet frowned. “Sage?” He stepped closer. “Did I catch you doing something you shouldn’t have?”

Sage turned around slowly. “I was trimming my bonsai.”

“Ah,” said Scarlet. “Sorry, I should have knocked.”

Sage sighed, setting down the secateurs. “Never mind. What can I help you with?”

Scarlet looked down uncomfortably, avoiding his gaze. “Am… am I… lonely?”

“Yes,” Sage said, then realised he had no idea what else to say and probably shouldn’t have said that in the first place.

Scarlet swore. “Damn it.”

“What made you change your mind and come and ask me?” Sage asked, sitting down.

“I… I realised I was just pissing everyone off and that I should try and sort this out.” Scarlet snorted. “Obviously, it’s not that simple.”

“Uh… well…” Come on Sage, think! Scarlet’s counting on you!

“Why don’t you just go out with someone?” Sage asked, sitting down.

“Really?” asked Scarlet.

“I don’t know!” Sage said defensively.

“Who would I even ask out, though?” Scarlet said. “I don’t like anyone at the moment.”

“What about Yang?” he suggested.

Scarlet shook his head. “No, she’s into Blake.”

“Nora?”

“She’s into Ren.”

“Uh…”

Okay, Sage, get it together. This time you have to be serious. Scarlet is your friend, and he’s relying on you to solve his problem…
“How about Ruby?”

Silence.

Sage felt his stomach drop.

Scarlet blinked.

“How about Ruby?”

Sage, you give good advice and you give bad advice, and that was the latter,” the redhead deadpanned.

Sage rubbed his temple sheepishly. “Yeah.”

“I mean, she’s two years younger than me.”

“Right.”

“And she’s Yang’s sister.”

“Yes.”

“And I don’t even know her that well!”

“Yes, that is a problem.”

Scarlet shook his head.

“What about –”

“Can we just play videogames?” Scarlet asked.

Sage gave in. “Yeah, okay.”

Chapter End Notes

The first couple of chapters of this fic are probably going to be filler-esque, but fear not! A plot will come! Anyway, thoughts? As always, your feedback is greatly appreciated!
“So…” Sun said. “Your parents.”

“Yes, my parents,” said Blake.

“They’re coming here.”

“Yes.”

“To Vale.”

“Uh huh.”

“For the Vytal Festival.”

“Sun, what’s with you?” Blake frowned. “I asked you to come with me for company, not for you to be all weird.”

“Well, you know,” Sun started, stretching lazily. “I’m excited to meet your parents. I feel as if this is a big step in our friendship.”

“Sure…” she replied. “And this has absolutely nothing to do with the fact that Sage and Scarlet are acting funny?”

Sun broke down. “Sage was browsing a dating site yesterday! Sage! A dating site!”

Blake raised her eyebrow. “He is a teenage male, you know?”

“But it’s Sage! Sage doesn’t do dating. He gets awkward and shy whenever someone flirts with him, and besides, his semblance makes everyone too transparent.”

Blake scratched her ear. “Maybe he’s doing it for someone else?”

Sun’s eyes widened, and then he just kind of… deflated, puddling onto the pavement. Blake stopped, hoping fervently that no one she knew saw her with her idiot friend.

“Uh, Sun?”

“It’s Scarlet,” he replied.

A couple of passers-by gave them some strange looks.

“What about Scarlet?” Blake asked.

“Sage is trying to set him up,” Sun replied, pulling himself upright into a slouch.

Blake struggled to understand. “Isn’t that a good thing?” she said. “Yang told me Scarlet was feeling depressed because he was lonely.”

“For someone who literally knows what other people are feeling, Sage is shockingly naïve when it comes to love,” Sun explained.
“Really?” said Blake, surprised. “Sage always struck me as the wise type.”

“Oh, he’s wise,” said Sun. “Just not with love.”

“Does he know this?” Blake frowned.

“Oh yeah,” he replied. “Sage is well aware he has no idea how to set people up.”

“Then… why is he trying?”

“Because he’s a mother hen!” Sun exclaimed, frustrated. “Scarlet’s upset, and Sage doesn’t like seeing people upset so he’s trying to help, even though he knows he’s rubbish at helping!”

Blake blinked. “That… sounds complicated.”

Sun groaned. “It is.”

They’d reached the docks by now, and Blake was leaning against the railing, looking out to sea. Sun sat on the railings, his tail dangling down to play with the water. Seagulls spiralled around the bay, calling to one another as if they were conspiring to steal fish from the fishermen.

After about half an hour or so, the ferry pulled in to the docks, and they walked over to the pier. Blake hugged herself, and Sun craned his neck to see if he could spot his friend’s parents, but he needn’t have bothered.

Ghira Belladona was a huge hulk of a faunus, a good head and a half taller than anyone else at the docks. Blake’s Dad was all bulging muscles and frowny eyebrows, and his chest was nearly as hairy as his beard.

Kali Belladona, on the other hand, was tiny in comparison. She shared her daughter’s cat ears and passion for black clothing, but that was as far as the similarities went. Sun could tell from the way Blake’s mother was beaming that she was friendliness incarnate – an aspect apparently at complete odds with her husband.

“Mum! Dad!” Blake cried, waving.

Ghira smiled when he saw her, then scowled when he saw Sun.

“Blake, darling!” Kali cried, running over to hug her daughter. “It’s been so long since we’ve seen you! How are you? How’s your team?”

“Who’s this?” Ghira growled, towering over Sun.


Ghira raised his eyebrow menacingly. “Friend?”

Sun laughed nervously. “Yeah.”

He glanced at Blake. Blake made an odd face, wincing.

“Wait, we’re friends, right?” Sun whispered, frowning.

Kali looked from Blake to Sun and back, then grinned.
“It’s nice to meet you, Sun!” she said, shaking his hand enthusiastically.

Ghira growled. “I don’t like you.”

Sun squeaked.

Blake’s Dad leaned in, glaring at Sun. “Listen here, runt, I don’t know what intentions you have with my daughter, but none of them are happening!”

Sun’s tail drooped. “Huh?”

Blake tugged on Ghira’s sleeve. “Dad, it’s not like that!”

“Oh!” Sun’s eyes widened. “Now I get it!”

Blake sighed.

Ghira frowned suspiciously. “Get what?”

“You think I like Blake in that way,” Sun laughed.

Kali pouted. “You don’t?”

Sun shook his head. “Sorry, she’s not my type.”

Ghira’s voice went dangerously low. “Are you saying my daughter’s not pretty?”

Sun took a step back involuntarily. “Not at all, sir!” he cried. “I just…”

“You just what?”

“I’m gay,” said Sun. “Very, very gay.”

Ghira blinked, standing upright. “Oh.”

“I have a boyfriend, too.”

Ghira scratched his neck uncomfortably. “I’m… sorry, I may have… overreacted.”

Sun grinned. “That’s alright, sir!”

“I still don’t like you, though.”

Sun’s smile dropped. “Oh.”

“I like you,” said Kali, linking her arm in his. “Perhaps you’ll tell me more about team RWBY. Blake’s been stubbornly silent about her teammates.”

“Mum!” Blake complained.

“I’d be glad to, Mrs Belladona!”

“Please, call me Kali.”

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Sage was trying too hard.
Scarlet had had to forcibly remove him from the computer and permanently delete all the accounts Sage had made on different dating sites under his name, and boy was that fun. Apparently, Sage wasn’t great at spotting the difference between a dating site and a hookup site, not even with all the porn ads along the side. Scarlet wasn’t even entirely sure Sage knew what porn was, not that he was going to tell him – that was a conversation their esteemed team leader could handle.

It had comforted him to see how much Sage cared, though. His friend was going through all of this trouble, just to see him happy…

Scarlet smiled.

“I haven’t seen you smile in days!” said Ruby, grinning. “It’s nice. You should smile more often!”

“Thanks,” said Scarlet, finishing up his essay. Ruby’s paper was covered in ink, but unfortunately none of the doodles actually formed words.

Ruby peered over at his work. “Um… Scarlet?”

“Yes?”

Ruby coughed. “Can I borrow your notes for Professor Oobleck’s class?” she asked. “I kind of… fell asleep in it.”

Scarlet shook his head wryly. “Sure.”

He got them out and handed them over to the girl, and as he did so their hands touched briefly. It was at this moment that he remembered his conversation with Sage from last night, and Scarlet blushed.

“Thanks, Scar!” Ruby beamed. “You’re the best! Weiss always tries to teach me her notes instead of just letting me copy them.”

“Yeah…” Scarlet scratched his head awkwardly. He gathered his stuff together and packed it away, standing up.

“See you later,” he said.

“See you!” Ruby smiled.

He didn’t move.

“Uh…” His mouth moved before he could think about what he was saying. “Do you want to go out with me?”

Ruby paused.

Scarlet froze, suddenly realising what he’d said.

Ruby bit her lip in contemplation.

“Sorry, I don’t know what came over me, I – ”

“Okay,” said Ruby. “I’ll go out with you.”

Scarlet blinked.
Drama time! Once again, sorry for the slow build. I hope you guys are ready for three more chapters of fluff, because after that the serious stuff begins...
The Dragon

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“He what!?” Weiss exclaimed, gasping.

“He asked me out,” Ruby said. “It’s no big deal.”

“Ruby, he asked you out!”

“I know!” Ruby cried defensively. “Why are you so worked up about it?”

Weiss looked away. “I just… it’s so sudden.”

“Yeah I know, but…” The younger girl shrugged. “Scarlet’s nice, and I didn’t want to say no.”

Weiss snorted. “So you’re going out with him because of pity?”

“No, I’m – ”

“Because that’s what it sounded like to me.” Weiss folded her arms, tossing her hair.

“Okay, maybe a little bit!” Ruby huffed. “So what if I am? I thought maybe I could cheer him up.”

Weiss sighed with relief. “Thank goodness. That’s so much better than the alternative.”

“The alternative?”

“That you actually like him,” the heiress replied.

Ruby frowned. “What’s wrong if I did like him?”

“Well, I just…” Weiss stammered, hugging herself. “I just don’t think you’d be very good together!”

Ruby blinked slowly. “This coming from the girl who asked out the gay guy?”

“Hey, how was I supposed to know Neptune was gay!?” Weiss protested.

Ruby pulled a face. “Yeah, you’re right.”

The door to their room slammed open and in burst Yang.

“Helloooo!” the blonde sang loudly, twirling. “What are you two doing here when we agreed to train with team JNPR outside?”

Their team leader jumped up in alarm. “I completely forgot!”

“Well that’s understandable when Scarlet just…” Weiss trailed off when she saw Ruby frantically shaking her head, but it was too late – the damage was done.

Yang yawned, stretching, and wrapped an arm around her younger sister casually. “Scarlet just… what?”

“Nothing,” said Ruby, a little too quickly.
“Weiss?” Yang smiled.

Weiss shook her head apologetically.

“Ruby?” Yang growled, squeezing her sister’s shoulder. “What did he do?”

“Nothing, okay!” Ruby protested, ducking out of her sister’s grasp. “He just asked me out, it’s no big d…” She clapped her hands to her mouth, but the words had already escaped.

Yang’s nostrils flared, and golden flames criss-crossed through her hair.

“Oh no,” said Weiss.

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“I asked her out.”

Sun started to say something, then stopped. He frowned, clasping his hands together, then looked back up.

“Sorry, could you run that by me again?”

Scarlet swallowed. “I asked Ruby out and she said yes.”

The faunus’ tail curled. “You asked Yang’s younger sister out?”

Scarlet blinked, then paled.

“I didn’t think this through,” he whispered.

“No, you didn’t.”

“Oh my Dust!” Scarlet cried, grasping his hair. “What am I going to do!? I didn’t mean it, it just kind of… happened!”

“Scarlet, how do you accidentally ask someone out!?!” Neptune said.

“I don’t know!” the redhead replied. “B-Blame Sage! He’s the one that planted the idea in my head!”

“And you listened to him!?” Sun cried.

“All three of you, stop shouting!” Sage interrupted, standing up.

Scarlet breathed in deeply, shaking his head and trying to keep his cool. Sun’s eyes kept darting around suspiciously, his fingers ghosting around Ruyi and Jingu. Neptune sighed, lying back on his bed.

“Okay,” said Sage. “Let’s think rationally, now. How bad can it be?”

Scarlet was confident Yang had been listening into their conversation; her timing was just too perfect. Literally as soon as Sage had finished saying that, the door was kicked down and the room was filled with dragon’s fire, Yang’s eyes glowing a bloodthirsty red.

“SCARLET!” she roared, grabbing him by his collar and lifting him up effortlessly.

Scarlet smiled weakly. “Hey, Yang.”
He whimpered when he saw death in Yang’s eyes, and Sun shook his head.

“Nope,” the faunus said, turning around and putting his hands up in surrender. “I am not getting involved. No way.”

Sage stepped in between the two of them, placing a hand on Scarlet’s shoulder and gripping Yang’s wrist with his other hand.

“Why don’t we all calm down?” he suggested, his voice silky smooth.

Yang snorted. “Butt out, Leaf-hair. This is between the fairy and me.”

“You really need to calm down,” said Sage. Scarlet tried to take refuge behind the other man, but Yang wouldn’t let him.

Yang snarled, glaring at Sage. “No matter how many times you repeat it, I…”

Sage’s eyes glowed emerald and Yang’s fire died away, the red fleeing from her eyes. She blinked, and dropped Scarlet, who promptly darted behind Sage and the safety of his semblance. Sun rolled his eyes and Neptune sat up, cracking his neck.

Yang scratched her head. “Why am I here again?” she asked.

Neptune jumped up, his eyes wide. “Shit, Sage, what did you do?”

“Relax, she’s fine,” Sage dismissed.

Yang nodded. “I am fine.”

“See?”

Yang yawned, stretching. “How weird. I remember being angry, but I don’t remember why I was angry.”

Scarlet peeked over Sage’s shoulder. “Really?”

Yang’s eyes narrowed. “No.”

“Obviously,” said Sage. “I can’t erase memories.”

“But you’re not angry anymore?” Neptune asked.

“No,” said Yang, glancing at Sage. “Apparently I’m not.”

Scarlet hesitated. “Listen, Yang, I’m sorry I asked Ruby out. I don’t really know why I did it, it was kind of spontaneous…”

“Yeah, well…” The blonde waved her hand. “It won’t last very long, anyway, so no worries.”

Scarlet frowned. “I’m not sure whether to feel insulted or not.”

“You’re an idiot,” said Sun. “Feel insulted now?”

Scarlet looked at the faunus sideways.

“Anyway,” the redhead continued, “I should just tell her I changed my mind…”
“No, you can’t do that!” Yang cried.

“Yeah!” said Neptune. “You’re the one who asked her out! You can’t break up with her before you’ve even gone on a date!”

“But – ” Scarlet spluttered.

“Listen, you need to show my sister a good time,” said Yang. “Treat her to a nice restaurant, try not to be your normal, bitchy self and make sure she has fun. Then you can break up with her.”

Scarlet scratched his head. “Right.” He nodded to himself. “I can do that.”

Sage grinned. “It’ll go great!”

Scarlet glared daggers at him. Sun snorted.

“Not too great,” Yang said quickly. “Medium great – more like good. It’ll go good.”

“Uh…”

Yang leaned into him, her eyes narrow. “If you lay a hand on my sister, I will know,” she growled. “You have been warned.”

Scarlet swallowed dryly. “Affirmative.”

Yang nodded. “Good.”

The blonde left, treading over the door that she had knocked off its hinges. Team SSSN stood in silence for a while, until Sage coughed. He walked over to the door and picked it up, propping it against the wall.

“I’ll go get stuff to fix this,” he said.

“No need.”

Neptune jumped up, taking the door from him. He placed it in the doorframe and passed his hands across the hinges, his eyes briefly flashing blue. Water condensed against the frame and froze over the hinges, fixing them in place. He opened and closed the door a couple of times, testing it until he was satisfied.

“There we go!” Neptune said proudly.

Sage frowned. “Huh.”

Scarlet waved his hands in exasperation. “Why didn’t you just freeze Yang!?” he cried.

Sun patted Scarlet on the back as he walked past him. “Because that was your problem, Scar.”

Sun and Neptune left the dorm, the faunus yawning as he did so, and Scarlet just blinked. He met Sage’s eyes.

“Don’t laugh,” Scarlet said. “I swear to Dust, Sage…”

“When would I ever do such a thing?” Sage replied, trying to keep a straight face but then breaking out into a wry smile.
Scarlet shook his head, muttering to himself.

Chapter End Notes

    So what did you think? Things are moving along, I guess? Maybe?
“So what are you having?” Ruby asked politely.


“I don’t really know.” She covered her mouth, whispering: “To be honest, I’ve never heard of most of the stuff on the menu.”

“Neither have I, which is why I’m going for the squid.”

Ruby laughed, and Scarlet smiled.

They were in a classy restaurant downtown, one that Sage had helped him find, and things were going… well. He had arrived on time, wearing his jacket over both shoulders to fulfil the ‘casual yet smart’ look. Ruby had arrived on time, wearing a pretty, wine-coloured dress that highlighted her figure in a demure way. Scarlet suspected that either Blake or Weiss had picked out the dress for her, as it had a modesty to it that definitely wasn’t Yang. Weiss had probably lent Ruby the necklace she wore now, an elegant, crystal snowflake suspended on a silver chain that matched her eyes and sparkled when she moved. They had made pleasant small talk on the way to the restaurant, and when they arrived outside the ‘Emericion’ Ruby had been surprised, but not overly intimidated. Neptune had advised Scarlet to make reservations, so they were promptly escorted to their table, and – here they were.

The lighting was smooth. The jazz music was smooth. The carpets and the furnishings were smooth, and even the menu itself was smooth, let alone the food.

Scarlet was not smooth.

Ruby said something; he didn’t hear.

“Sorry, what?”

The girl shook her head wryly. “I asked how your day was.”

“Oh, fine, fine,” said Scarlet.

Ruby frowned. “What lessons did you have?”

Scarlet’s eyes darted around. “History. Maths, English, and Physics, I think.”

“I had history, too! We were learning about the Great War. Again.”

“You can never know enough about war,” said Scarlet absent-mindedly.

Yang said she would be watching him, but where was she? More importantly, had he done anything wrong so far? He didn’t think so, but then he didn’t know what Yang would classify as wrong.

Ruby followed Scarlet’s eyes around the place, and sighed.

“You’re looking for my sister, aren’t you?” she asked.
“What?” Scarlet jumped a bit, but then recovered. “No, no. I’m… looking at you.”

*Oh Dust.*

Scarlet would have liked to think he said that last line suavely, but that would have been a lie. Neptune would have said it suavely, and probably winked as he did so. Scarlet said it hesitantly, slightly squeaking, and it ended up sounding more like a question than a compliment.

“Yeah, I made Jaune promise to distract Yang so she wouldn’t interfere,” said Ruby. “You can relax, now.”

Scarlet breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you, Ruby.”

She smiled. “I should be thanking you for taking me to this fancy place.”

Scarlet grimaced. “Perhaps it’s a little *too* fancy. They have an entire wall dedicated to different types of red wine!”

“I’m not old enough to drink, though.”

He winced. “That’s probably a good thing.”

A waiter came over. “May I take your orders?”

“Yeah, sure,” said Scarlet, pulling a face. Ruby laughed again.

***

Weiss wandered the streets with a purpose – a purpose that may or may not have been to stop thinking about Ruby. Ruby didn’t like Scarlet; they’d established that much. So why was Weiss so worried? Scarlet was nice(ish), he wouldn’t do anything to Ruby. Even if he did, Ruby could take care of herself.

Weiss had lent Ruby her diamond pendant, the snowflake one her mother had given her. Of course, Ruby didn’t know it was diamond. Ruby didn’t know it suited her, either, because Weiss hadn’t told the girl how good she’d looked. Dust knows their team leader didn’t need *another* thing to inflate her ego.

She swished her hair as if to swish those thoughts out of her head, and continued on her way.

Blake had mentioned something along the lines of running out of tea, so Weiss had suggested they go shopping later on, and here they were. Luckily, Blake hadn’t noticed that Weiss wasn’t entirely with her.

“Why are boys so embarrassing?” Blake was saying. “Both my Dad and Sun tried to hold that door for me.”

Weiss chuckled. “If I didn’t know he was gay, I’d assume he had a thing for you.”

“My Mum said exactly the same thing,” Blake replied.

Just then, they ran into Sun’s parents and sister, ambling down the street.

“Hello!” Blake waved.

Sun’s parents waved back, and Yaya came skipping over.
“Blake! Weiss! What are you two doing here?”

“We ran out of tea,” Blake said. “What about you? And where are the twins?”

“We just finished watching a karate tournament,” Huang explained. “We left the twins with Sun because they can’t sit still.”

“They love being with him, so it’s fine,” Jin filled in.

Weiss frowned. “Don’t you want to see your brother, too?” she asked Yaya.

The girl shrugged. “Yeah, but I’m old enough to have him on social media, so I already know way too much about his life.”

Blake laughed. “I know what you mean.”

Weiss snorted wryly. “How old are you, by the way?”

“Eleven,” she said, “but I’m mature for my age.”

“I can tell…”

“So do you like karate, then?” Blake asked.

Yaya nodded. “When we get back to Vacuo I’m going to start having lessons. Isn’t that right, Dad?”

Jin nodded. “My brother’s a sensei.”

“Uncle Kin said I can train with him when I’m twelve.”

“When’s your birthday?”

“It’s the day before the Vytal festival!” Yaya said.

“Just over a week!” Blake grinned. “Do you have anything planned?”

“Mum and Dad do, but they won’t tell me,” Yaya huffed, pouting.

Huang tapped the side of her nose.

“Do they teach you karate at Beacon?” the girl asked curiously.

Blake scratched her head. “I think there’s a club, but most students arrive already knowing the basics of martial arts. We’re mostly taught how to use our weapons and auras effectively.”

Yaya listened with wide eyes, nodding along.

“Ruby probably knows karate,” Weiss said.

“Wow!” Yaya exclaimed. “She’s your team leader, isn’t she? She’s so cool!”

“Yeah,” said Weiss.

A lull in the conversation.

“Which way were you going?” Jin asked.
“That way,” Blake replied, pointing back up the street in the direction of Beacon.

“We’re going the other way,” he replied.

“See you around?” asked Yaya.

Blake smiled. “Definitely.”

Weiss waved. “Bye!”

They parted ways, but it was a while before the sound of Yaya’s voice faded away.

Blake snorted. “She’s Sun’s sister, alright.”

“You can say that again.”

As they were about to turn the corner, they noticed a poster against the wall, captioned MISSING. Below was the photo of a young woman, only slightly older than themselves. The woman had platinum-blonde hair, tied in a ponytail that draped across her shoulder, slate-grey eyes and a soft smile. Luna Grey hadn’t been seen since Monday night, and her relatives were urging anyone with information to come forwards.

“That’s terrible,” said Weiss.

Blake hummed in agreement, her brows creased.

The photo on the poster unnerved Weiss a bit, actually. It was probably the most recent photo of Luna they had, but the woman’s smile… The Luna in the photo had no idea she was missing, and that struck Weiss as desperately sad.

“Let’s go back,” the heiress said.

Blake nodded, and they were on their way. Weiss was just in the middle of venting about how Mrs Azulado hadn’t turned up to choir practice, again, when they ran into Yang.

“Great!” the blonde said. “You guys are free! I just managed to get Jaune off my tail!”

Weiss’ stomach sank.

***

“You know, I was kind of expecting them to serve the whole squid,” said Ruby.

Scarlet snorted. ‘I’m not sure I would have been prepared to eat it if they had.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Ruby took another sip of her water, so Scarlet did the same. He was being good – not a drop of alcohol had passed his lips.

“The squid was good, though,” Ruby continued, and Scarlet had to agree. “Not too slippery.”

Scarlet laughed, and Ruby smiled. He caught her smiling and stopped laughing self-consciously.

“It’s good that you’re feeling better,” Ruby said.

“Excuse me?”
Ruby waved her hand. “You seemed down these past couple of days, so I’m glad I was able to cheer you up.”

It was Scarlet’s turn to smile. “Yeah.”

Ruby cocked her head. “Why were you so gloomy?” she asked.

“Uh, well…” Scarlet stammered. “Apparently, I’m lonely.”

“Oh.” Ruby blinked, sitting up straight. “Look, Scarlet, I should probably get this clear… I mean, you’re a perfectly nice person, but…”

“Oh, no no, I didn’t…” He blushed. “I wasn’t…”

“… there’s nothing wrong with you, but I just don’t…”

“… feel that way,” Scarlet finished.

Ruby paused. “Wait, so you don’t like me in that way?”

“Um…” He hesitated. “No, not really.” He looked down. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s cool,” she replied. “Me neither.” Ruby frowned. “So why did you ask me out?”

Scarlet scratched the of his neck, feeling very, very embarrassed. He was pretty sure his face was the same colour as his hair, and that wasn’t a good thing.

“I’m… not really sure, to be honest,” he admitted.

Ruby giggled. “That’s so like you.”

He sighed. “It is, isn’t it?”


He looked up. “Me too.”

“Friends?”

Scarlet nodded. “Friends.”

***

They watched as Ruby and Scarlet left the restaurant, and watched as Scarlet offered her his arm, which she took. Both of them were grinning as they chatted, and Scarlet even said something that made Ruby laugh.

Yang clenched her fist. “How dare it go well!” she whispered, rustling the bush they were hiding in as she did so.

Weiss privately agreed, although she felt bad for doing so, as Ruby deserved to be happy.

“I still don’t know why we’re here,” said Blake, folding her arms.

“We’re looking after my little sister!” Yang replied. “Scarlet’s two years older than her; it can’t be allowed to happen!”
“Okay, firstly, the age gap isn’t that serious,” said Blake. “Secondly, it isn’t happening.”

“But look at them!” Yang cried.

“I am,” Blake said. “I can tell when two people are a couple, and those two? They’re a couple of friends.”

Yang breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank Dust.”

Weiss frowned. “Are you sure?”

Blake smiled wryly. “Yes, I’m sure.”

“Good.”

Weiss hadn’t meant to say that out loud, and if the other two heard her, they said nothing.

Chapter End Notes

I still don't have anyone to proof-read this, so please excuse any mistakes.
“Why is that tree so small?” Cuja asked.

“It’s a bonsai,” said Sage. “It’s grown to be small.”

“But why?” the boy repeated.

“Looking after it teaches you to be patient.”

Cuja frowned, shoving his face right up close to the tree. After some time, he declared:

“It would be better if you could eat it.”

Sage chuckled. “Perhaps you’re right.”

“How do you –”

“Look at me, Cuja, I’m Neptune!” Mara yelled from across the room. He stood atop Sun’s bed, Neptune’s goggles almost falling off his head, and brandished Neptune’s weapon in gun form, pointing it at his twin.

“No no, Mara, that is not a toy!” Neptune cried, trying in vain to snatch his weapon back. Mara jumped out of his reach, though, hanging on to the ceiling light with his tail and swinging about.

“Sun, get him off there,” Neptune complained. “It’s going to break.”

“Don’t you dare!” Mara challenged, shaking the gun.

Sun grinned, then leapt onto the light, wrestling Neptune’s weapon from his brother and chucking it to his boyfriend. Neptune caught it gingerly and Mara leapt down, trying to get it back, but Neptune held it high above his head. Sage grabbed Cuja’s tail before he could go to his brother’s aid.

“Come on, boys, that’s enough,” Sage said.

A creak.

They looked at Sun.

“Dude, I don’t think that can hold your weight –” Neptune started to say, just as the light fell with an almighty crash.

Glass shattered as Sun landed on the lightbulbs, and bare wires now dangled from the ceiling precariously.

“SUN!” the twins screamed.

“Sun!” Neptune cried, rushing to the faunus’ side. “Are you alright?”

Sun winced, sitting up. “Yeah, just…” Sun showed them his arm as Neptune hovered around him anxiously and Sage leant down, Mara and Cuja hugging on to the tall man’s shoulders. Shards of
glass decorated the faunus’ right forearm and blood was starting to well, dripping onto the floor.

“Is there anything on your back or anywhere else?” Neptune asked.

Sage had a look, and shook his head. “Not anything major. I think it’s only the ones on your arm that’ll need stitches.”

Sun sighed, and tried to stand up, but Sage held a hand against his chest to stop him.

“You’re bare foot,” he pointed out.

Neptune scooped Sun up, then set him down clear of the glass. Sun held his arm and smiled at Neptune apologetically.

“The nurse isn’t going to be too impressed with me, is he?”

“Never mind the nurse, who’s going to fix the light?” Neptune retorted.

Sage shook his head. “Never mind that. I’ll find someone to take care of the light; you two go to the infirmary.”

The twins crept up to their brother guiltily, their heads low and their tails drooping.

“Sorry, Sun,” Mara said, his lip trembling and his voice wavering.

Sun smiled softly, ruffling Mara’s hair with his other hand. “It’s okay, fella! Don’t worry about it!”

Just then, Jaune stuck his head round the door. He raised his eyebrow. “What… happened?”

“Sun happened,” said Sage.

Jaune took in the bare wires, the broken lightbulbs and Sun’s arm, and shook his head exasperatedly.

“How even…?” he muttered to himself, ducking back out of their room.

“Is he alright?” came Pyrrha’s voice.

“I don’t think Sun was ever alright to begin with,” Jaune replied, their voices fading as they walked off.

The faunus pouted.

***

The nurse treated Sun begrudgingly, sighing as he did so.

“Those lights aren’t designed to be idiot-proof,” the nurse said.

The twins sniggered.

“Yeah, okay,” said Sun, glaring at them.

The nurse finished up and trimmed the stitches, running a hand through his slate-blue hair. His glasses were thick, although because of the harsh lighting of the room you couldn’t really see the colour of his eyes behind the reflection. His skin was pale, and he sported a spotless lab coat, a stethoscope hanging around his neck with the intention of completing the stereotype. Sun didn’t even know his name, and considering how often he’d been in here, he felt as if he should have learnt it by
now. A quick peek at the plaque on the door fixed this: Dr Manannán mac Lir, MS, DSN, DPT. Sun didn’t know what the abbreviations after his name meant, but he was suitably impressed nonetheless.

Dr Mac Lir folded his arms. “My contract says I have to tell you to be more careful before letting you go, but I honestly don’t care,” he said. “I may have mentioned this before, but as long as you don’t die, the more you get hurt the more I get paid.”

Neptune snorted. “That’s an odd contract.”

The nurse grinned. “This is an odd school.”

“Thanks, anyhow,” Sun said as they left.

***

Scarlet arrived just as the electrician left, and he stared at their new light suspiciously.

“Dare I ask what happened?” he hesitated.

“Sun was babysitting his brothers,” Sage replied.

“And?”

“He climbed onto the light when he shouldn’t have.”

Scarlet smirked. “Don’t tell me he had to go get stitches, again?”

“Yep.”

Scarlet flopped down on his bed, exhaling loudly. He wriggled out of his jacket and turned on his side, still looking at the light.

“Why is it a heart, though?” he asked.

The replacement light was set into a metal heart that dominated the ceiling, snatching the attention of anyone that walked in.

Sage shrugged. “Apparently, that was the only spare fitting they had. Ozpin seemed to find it funny.”

“Maybe we should move Sun and Neptune’s beds so they’re right under the heart,” Scarlet suggested.

Sage frowned. “Maybe not.”

He opened the windows, letting in some fresh air.

“How was the date, by the way?” Sage asked.

Scarlet yawned, stretching. “It went well, actually. In a platonic way, though. It turns out neither of us were interested in the other.”

“That’s too bad.”

“Yeah.” Scarlet rolled over to look at Sage. “I think I’m feeling better, though. It’s cheered me up.”

Sage smiled, and Scarlet noticed that his teeth were surprisingly white, especially when contrasted against his dark skin. It made for quite the handsome effect, actually, even more so when added to
the dying sunlight that silhouetted Sage in rose and amber.

Sage blinked, frowned, then shuffled slightly, shaking his head.

“Where are Sun and Neptune, by the way?” Scarlet asked.

“They went to take Mara and Cuja back to the hotel,” Sage said. “I should probably find them, actually. Goodwitch is making Sun pay for the damage.”

Scarlet snickered.

Sage snorted, turning to look out of the window. He was leaning casually against the windowsill, the top buttons of his shirt undone, and Scarlet didn’t think he’d ever actually appreciated how sculpted —

Sage coughed.

Scarlet realised where his thoughts had been going and blushed.

“Sorry.”

Sage shrugged, saying nothing.

Scarlet was saved from his embarrassment by Sun and Neptune’s arrival, and Sun’s subsequent “What the hell is that!?” The faunus’ language only became fouler once Sage informed him who was paying for the new light.

***

The woman stood on the edge of the rooftop, the fingers of the wind tearing at her hair and clothes. She presented an odd picture – her skin was fresh and clean, but her clothes were ragged around the edges. Her mouth was smiling but her eyes were a pale, watery blue, not empty, but… not there, either. It was as if she was both looking and not looking at him, and those eyes unnerved him greatly.

“Step away from the edge, Luna,” Qrow said. “You don’t want to do this.”

“You’re giving me no choice,” the woman replied, smiling sadly. Her voice was soft and ever so slightly strained.

“We can help you,” Qrow said, choosing his words hesitantly. He moved to step forwards but Luna flinched and he froze, staying where he was. “We can get him out of your head.”

“I don’t want to stop hearing him,” said Luna. She clutched a trembling hand to her bosom. “I just want to be with him.”

“That’s not true,” he tested. “That’s what he wants, not what you want.”

The blue in her eyes flashed, and Luna jerked upright, her mouth curled into a snarl. “How would you know what I want!? ” she growled, her voice much deeper than it should be. “You weren’t even on my team!”

“Let her go, Merrow,” Qrow hissed, settling into a stance and brandishing his scythe.

The woman’s body went slack, and she smiled again. “As you wish.”

The blue left Luna’s eyes just as she stepped off the building. Her eyes widened and she shrieked,
but Qrow darted forwards and jumped after her, digging into the wall with his scythe and reaching out with his other hand. Their fingers brushed –

It was not enough.

Qrow forced himself to look as the woman hit the ground. He flinched and grit his teeth, sickened and wracked with guilt. Too late – he had been too late, too unlucky. Luna lay on the ground almost peacefully, a crimson halo bleeding from her, or a scarlet flower, blossoming from her skull.

Someone stepped out from the pub opposite, staggered a bit, then looked up across the road and screamed.

Chapter End Notes

Dun dun dun! The plot is taking shape... Anyway, what did you think? Feedback would make my day!
“Yo, Neptune!”

The blue-haired boy looked up, and smiled when he saw Roxo Azulado waving. He waved back and the huntress sat down next to him, stretching. Roxo had tanned since he’d last seen her, her skin a couple of shades away from Sage’s now, and she’d re-dyed her hair, that lick of blue amidst the purple brighter than before. She was grinning, and her whole body radiated energy and excitement, barely contained.

Neptune frowned, checking his watch. “Aren’t you supposed to be leading the choir practice right now?”

Roxo shrugged nonchalantly. “They practice fine without me.”

“My friend Weiss gets really annoyed with you, you know,” he commented.

“Weiss, huh?” Roxo frowned. “I can’t imagine why, her voice is beautiful.”

“And your semblance?”

“It’s getting easier and easier to control it,” Neptune said.

“Wait, husband?” Neptune repeated, but Roxo was already gone.

He stood up, slightly shocked. Impulsive, irresponsible Roxo had a husband? It wasn’t the fact that she was married that surprised him, more like he was incredibly curious to see what kind of person Roxo would choose to spend her life with. This he had to see…
Sage continued to read, completely unperturbed by anything that may have happened last night.

Scarlet pretended to read, completely panicking about something that might not even have happened last night. He started tapping his fingers.

Okay, so Scarlet had had some… slightly… uh… appreciative thoughts about Sage. This in itself was not a problem. It was completely natural to have an occasional stray thought, and Scarlet had no problem admitting that his teammates were good-looking.

The problem was that this was not a stray thought. Scarlet did not stay awake at night because of stray thoughts, nor did he have stray thoughts about Sage.

It was Sage.

Caring, sensible, innocent Sage, whom was both gifted and cursed with empathy. Sage, whom neglected to date because he would know exactly what his date was feeling, and he didn’t want to disappoint them when he didn’t feel the same way. Sage, whom had once admitted to Scarlet that one of the things that really frightened him were his own emotions, because they were the only ones he couldn’t see.

Sage.

Scarlet was guilty that his mind had wandered, and he was guilty that Sage had had to see it. He also knew that Sage knew exactly how bad he felt about the whole thing, and he was really, really confused as to why Sage was acting so nonchalant about it. Maybe it wasn’t a big deal? Maybe Scarlet was just blowing it up out of proportion, and Sage just didn’t care? But then if he didn’t care about the initial thought, then what about all of the subsequent, panicky ones?

Why was Scarlet so worked up about this!?

Sage was his best friend, and probably knew him better than he knew himself, so stop freaking out!

“Dude,” said Yang, grabbing his hand to stop him from fidgeting. She raised her eyebrow.

“Sorry,” said Scarlet.

“Sorry,” said Scarlet.

Yang exchanged a concerned glance with her sister, and Sage frowned at him. Scarlet avoided his gaze. He was saved by Nora, who pulled up a chair next to him and slumped on the table, sighing melodramatically.

“I’m bored,” she whined impatiently.

“Where’s Ren?” Ruby asked.

“Cooking. He kicked me out of the kitchen.”

“Jaune?”

“Training with Pyrrha.”

“Ah.”

Nora looked up. “Wanna go do something?”

“Sorry, I can’t.” Ruby glared miserably at her work. “If I don’t finish this essay I’m going to fail history.”
“Ouch.” Nora winced.

Scarlet saw the opportunity to distract himself, and took it gladly.

“I’m free,” he said, sitting up.

Nora’s eyes widened. “Can we fly together again?” she asked eagerly. “Like when we fought the White Fang. That was so fun!”

Sage was about to say something but was interrupted by Weiss storming into the library, absolutely livid. Behind her tailed a slightly intimidated-looking Neptune, followed by a grinning Sun.

“I. Am. Furious!” the heiress cried, tossing her hair with so much wrath that Scarlet was afraid it would fall off her head.

Ruby sighed, putting her pen down. “Was Mrs Azulado not there again?”

“No!” Weiss snorted. “She wasn’t! She was talking to Neptune!”

They swivelled their heads.

Sage blinked. “So… you were bunking with a teacher?”

“I wasn’t bunking,” Neptune protested indignantly. “I’m a good student!”

“… But Roxo was bunking.”

“In her defence, she was going to meet her husband at the airport,” the blue-haired boy replied.

Silence.

Sun’s mouth fell open, and Sage raised his eyebrow.

“You mean to tell me that someone actually managed to tie Roxo down?” Scarlet asked.

Neptune nodded. “Apparently so. Want to go see who it is?”

“Definitely.”

Sage and Scarlet stood up at the same time, making eye contact, which Scarlet quickly broke. Yang and Ruby got up, too, and Nora leapt to her feet enthusiastically.

“Wait, who’s this person again?” she asked, scratching her head.

“Remember the huntress with short, purple hair?” Yang prompted.

“Oh yeah.”

They’d spent nearly a week with Roxo as part of the field trip, so Scarlet had got to know her pretty well. Personally, he was betting on Mr Azulado as being a six-foot, bull-muscled maniac, although he knew by now he shouldn’t expect anything.

As luck would have it, they made it outside just as Mr and Mrs Azulado were arriving. From this distance, all they could see was that he was tall and dark-skinned, with hair a sombre, turquoise-green. The huntress waved at them from across the courtyard, beckoning them.

“Boys! Come meet my husband!”
The closer they got, the wider Weiss’ eyes became until she was just staring in disbelief. Roxo’s husband was tall, yes, but not so much bull-muscled. In fact, he was quite thin, although Scarlet could clearly see the wiry muscles beneath his chocolate skin. His hair was a leafy green, and his eyes were pools of lavender, portraying a calm and collected disposition. In fact, his whole posture was relaxed, and he seemed quite comfortable with Roxo clinging to his arm. Despite camouflage shorts and sandals, Mr Azulado wore nothing else except for a feathered hat, although his torso and face were either tattooed or painted with swirling lines of red and black. He carried on his back a giant backpack, and poking out of it Scarlet could make out a quiver and what might have been the outline of a bow.

Roxo grinned. “This is my pet idiot, A – ”

“Amazon!” Weiss gasped, stepping out from behind Ruby. “Wh – How!?” she stammered. “Mrs Azulado is married to one of my sister’s teammates!”

Amazon frowned at her, about to say something, and Roxo gaped.

“I’m one of your sister’s teammates!” the huntress cried, outraged.

Weiss shook her head. “No way.”

“Yes way!” Roxo protested. “Amazon, Roxo, Onda and Winter! Team AROW!”

“Wait, they were on your sister’s team?” Ruby exclaimed.

“You have a sister!?” Nora cried.

“Yes, I have a sister!” Weiss huffed. “Just… I can’t believe this!”

“I can’t believe this either,” Roxo snorted. “Are you sure Winter never mentioned me?”

“No, of course not!” Weiss said. “Father didn’t approve of Winter becoming a huntress, so she didn’t speak much about it at home. I only met Amazon because I followed my sister to school, once.”

Amazon smiled warmly. “I remember that day.” He patted her on the back. “You’ve grown up into a fine young lady, Weiss.”

Weiss blushed. Roxo rubbed her arms, muttering something about Winter darkly.

“Amazon, these are my teammates, Ruby and Yang,” Weiss introduced.

“I’m Nora!” Nora said.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Amazon replied.

Team SSSN introduced themselves and Sun frowned, snickering.

“What?” Neptune asked.

“I just realised something,” the faunus replied.

He raised his eyebrow.

“Don’t you think Sage and Amazon could be brothers?”

Neptune blinked, looking from Sage to Amazon, and the rest of them did the same. Both men were
tall. Both had green hair, both had dark skin, both were bare-chested and both had tattoos. Scarlet had to admit, the resemblance was uncanny.

“Oh my Dust that is creepy!” Nora shivered.

“That’s really cute,” Yang said.

Amazon laughed. “We do resemble each other, don’t we?”

Sage grinned. “Do you come from Sunam, by any chance?”

Amazon shook his head. “Manam,” he replied. “It’s across the swamp.”

“Ah.” Sage nodded.

Scarlet snorted wryly. “Now if only Amazon had a thing for plants, too…”

The older man blinked. “Wait, you’re into botany?”

Sage hesitated. “Yeah…”

Amazon grinned. “What a coincidence!”

Scarlet rolled his eyes.

Roxo tugged on her husband’s arm. “You can fangirl later, babe. We’ve got to speak with Ironwood first, remember?”

“Oh yeah.” Amazon nodded. “If you have any spare time, you should drop by the greenhouse,” he said to Sage. “I’ll be spending most of my spare time there.”

Sage nodded. “I’d be happy to!”

“See y’all later,” Roxo called as the two of them went into the tower.

Weiss started. “Hey wait! You still haven’t said anything about choir –”

Roxo and Amazon disappeared inside, and Weiss sighed.

Sun poked Sage with his tail. “Looks like someone made a new friend.”

Sage brushed him off absent-mindedly. “Yeah…”

Chapter End Notes

So this chapter's kind of... meh. Sorry about that.
Ruby was on her way to the canteen when she noticed that a classroom up ahead still had lights on, and that there were voices coming from inside. Ruby didn’t eavesdrop, because she was not that kind of person. What she did was to slow down and drop a coin on the floor, softly though, so as not to alert anybody. She shook her head, placing her hands on her hips. How terrible! Now she would just have to loiter around in the corridor outside the classroom until she found her coin. It was a small coin, though, and it might not even exist, so finding it could take some time…

“…it’s good to have you with us again,” said a male voice. It was deep and gravely, definitely not a student. A teacher, perhaps? Ruby thought she recognised it, at any rate.

“I’m glad to be here,” a second voice replied – Amazon.

Some shuffling about, and then:

“Did you manage to track him down?” It was the first voice again, and with a start Ruby realised it was General Ironwood.

“Yes,” replied Amazon. “He’s –”

A small commotion, and the sound of wings batting against a window that somebody opened.

“He’s in Vale,” said the newcomer, and Ruby stifled her gasp.

Someone else inside the classroom actually gasped, and Ruby could only guess it was Roxo. “How can you be sure? He hasn’t –”

“I’m afraid so,” said her Uncle Qrow gravely. “He already has one victim.”

Ironwood swore, and Ruby shuffled backwards just as someone closed the door to the classroom, and to the conversation within.

Getting quickly to her feet, Ruby shook her head. Uncle Qrow, here in Beacon? Already? A couple of years ago, Ruby would have been upset that Qrow hadn’t visited her and Yang first, but by now Ruby recognised that some things were more important than your nieces. To be honest? Whatever was going on, Ruby just hoped she and her team could stay out of it.

***

Just as Scarlet was about to start eating dinner, Yang slapped her tray down next to him. Frowning, he closed his mouth and set down his fork.

“Hello?” he said, somewhat tentatively.

“Oh!” Yang replied.

Scarlet blinked. Yang started eating. Shrugging, he did the same. Ruby sat down next to her sister, then leaned round to stare at Scarlet.

“Uh…”
“You’re acting weird again,” said Ruby.

“Oh no.”

“Not a bad weird like before,” Yang corrected. “Just a weird weird.”

“Your descriptive powers awe me,” Scarlet replied.

“Is it Sage?” asked Ruby.

Scarlet spluttered, coughing. Sage, Neptune and Sun looked over from further along the table, but Scarlet waved them off.

Neptune smirked. “Need water?”

Scarlet growled. “No matter how many times you ask, I am not drinking anything you make with your semblance.”

“Suit yourself.” He shrugged, summoning a glass of water to his hands. Well, the glass was actually ice, so was it an ice of water, or…

Sun snatched the glass (ice?) of water from Neptune’s hands and drank it all, licking his lips.

“Y’all are missing out,” the faunus said. “Neptune’s delicious. And I don’t just mean his water…”

“Sun!” Neptune squeaked, blushing furiously.

Sage just raised his eyebrow as if to say Really? Blake and Velvet laughed from the other table, and Weiss just covered her eyes.

Yang hugged her sister’s head, covering her ears. “Excuse me, Mr Wukong! There are children present!”

“There were – ”

“Don’t even finish that,” Neptune warned.

Sun snorted indignantly, and things settled down.

“Anyway,” said Ruby, wriggling out of Yang’s arms. “You’ve been making weird noises and stealing glances at Sage all day, then acting strangely when you’ve had to talk to him.”

Scarlet glanced at Sage. He hadn’t heard.

“See?” Ruby folded her arms.

“Okay, okay!” Scarlet hissed quietly, leaning in. “Just… be discreet, alright?”

“Yes, sir,” whispered Yang.

He frowned at her suspiciously, but then decided he might as well get this off his chest.

“You know how it’s perfectly natural to have… random, stray thoughts about people?” Scarlet started.

Yang nodded. “Oh yeah. At least once a week I need to remind myself that Neptune already has a blond with fantastic abs to play with.”
Both Scarlet and Ruby ignored her.

“Anyway, yesterday I had one of those thoughts about Sage.”

Ruby’s eyes widened. “Doesn’t his empathy let him know what kinds of thoughts people…” she trailed off awkwardly.

“Exactly!” Scarlet whispered. “It’s really awkward, but I don’t know if it’s really awkward because it might all be in my head!”

“Dude, it’s definitely in your head,” said Yang. “Sage is hot. Don’t you think he’d be used to stray thoughts by now?”

Scarlet swallowed. “Well… yeah, but…”

A cough.

Scarlet froze.

Both Yang and Ruby winced.

“Scarlet,” said Sage.

Scarlet turned around, even though he really didn’t want to. Neptune and Sun were bickering like the idiots they were, and there was Sage, having slid down the table to be directly opposite him. Scarlet shrank back instinctively, even though Sage showed absolutely no signs of anger, annoyance, disgust or disappointment.

Sage sighed gently. “Please stop panicking about it,” he said.

“But I – ”

“You think that was the first time you’ve thought I was hot?”


“I thought so.”

“W-What do you mean?” Scarlet frowned, confused.

“The reason you’re panicking so much now is that this is the first time you’ve consciously had a thought about me like that,” Sage explained.

“I’m sorry,” Scarlet blurted out.

“Why?” asked Sage. “I’ve been able to see emotions my entire life, including when everyone around me was going through puberty. I’m used to lust by now.”

“Yeah, well you’d have to be, living with Sun and Neptune,” Scarlet couldn’t resist saying.

Sage snorted fondly. “Besides,” he added. “I am quite hot, aren’t I?”

Scarlet didn’t know what to say. Neither did Ruby and neither did Yang, for once. Neptune and Sun just stared at them with wide eyes and mouths agape.

Eventually, the faunus cried: “Did Sage just flirt?”
Sage blinked. “Was that flirting?” he asked. “I was just trying to be funny.”

Scarlet broke down with laughter. His belly ached and there were tears in his eyes, but that was just so Sage!

Just then, however, the doors to the canteen slammed open, startling everyone. Blake jumped up, hissing, and Scarlet tensed, reaching for his pistol.

Nora stood in the doorway, panting heavily.

“Nora?” Ruby hesitated, standing up. “What’s wrong?”

Nora raised her head, a wild look in her eyes.

She took a deep breath, then yelled:

“JAUNE KISSED PYRHHA!”

Chapter End Notes

The ship has sailed! Plus some other stuff...
No one was really quite sure what to make of this news.

For the second time that evening, Yang was lost for words. Ruby was grinning stupidly, and Sage was trying to keep a straight face when they all knew he would be terrible at poker. Weiss looked confused and probably a little offended that Jaune had lost all interest in her, and Blake just didn’t care, going back to bury her nose in a book.

After a couple of seconds to get to grips with the sudden news, Neptune suddenly punched Sun playfully.

“Guess who’s going to be ordering lobster, boy!” he smirked triumphantly. “I won the bet!”

Sage frowned. “What bet?”

Sun glowered at his boyfriend. “Seriously, in all senses of the phrase, fuck you.”

Sage continued to eye them suspiciously. “What bet…?”

Just then, Ren burst into the canteen, breathing heavily.

“Nora,” he gasped, his hands on his knees. “Thank Dust I finally found you. Jaune wanted me to tell you to stay away from…” Ren looked up, and took in the general atmosphere. He groaned. “Nora…”

“What?” Nora retorted. “If you’re going to warn me, you should have warned be before I walked in on them making out, not after.”

Ren sighed, putting a hand to his head in exasperation. “There was a note on the door telling you to keep out.”

Nora shrugged. “I didn’t assume it applied to teammates.”

“It said ‘Nora, keep out!’”

“Could’ve been another Nora.”

“Nora!”

“Yep?”

From across the room Sun said: “Dude, are you sure you won the bet, because they’re arguing like a married couple.”

“Oh no!” Nora laughed nervously. “We’re not a couple.”

Neptune grinned, elbowing Sun and whispering “Lobster.” Ren frowned.
They sat down in a circle on the green, only Scarlet wasn’t really sure why he was here. The girls had been super excited to hear from Jaune and Pyrrha. Fortunately, Pyrrha was super excited to tell them everything, despite Jaune’s embarrassment.

“I can’t believe Jaune kissed you!” Yang was saying.

“Neither can I,” Sun muttered.

Pyrrha giggled. “Oh no, he didn’t kiss me. It was the other way around.”

A chorus of ohhs and understanding came from the circle.

“But how did that happen?” Weiss frowned. “You just kissed him out of the blue and now you’re together?”

“Yeah, I wanna know, too!” Nora cried. “Give us your seduction tips!”

“She didn’t seduce me,” Jaune interrupted. “Over the past couple of weeks I’ve… realised how I felt about her, so I… spoke to her about it and stuff just… happened.” He trailed off, blushing furiously.

Pyrrha smiled, holding Jaune’s hand. “It was very sweet.”

Sun raised his eyebrow. “Dude, I’m impressed you had the balls to confess to her first,” he said.

“He’s also annoyed that it didn’t take a kraken, running away and the White Fang for you two to get together,” Neptune added. “And that I won the bet.”

“What bet!?” Sage cried. “Why were you two gambling?”

“We were betting on whether – ”

“It’s nothing…” Neptune interrupted hastily, covering Sun’s mouth. Sun licked Neptune’s fingers and Neptune squeaked, letting go.

“But seriously, guys, how do you just… confess?” Nora asked, scratching her head.

“By talking,” Blake deadpanned.

“Yeah, but what if the person you like is really oblivious?”

They looked at Sun and Neptune.

“Don’t go down our route,” said Sun. “Just… don’t. Too many stitches.”

Ren shuffled uncomfortably. “So, Nora… You like someone?”

Silence.

Nora just stared at Ren, mouth agape. Scarlet pitied the poor girl: there was obliviousness, and then there was Ren.

Jaune and Pyrrha were sitting together, holding hands in a pure, innocent kind of way. Sun had wriggled his way into Neptune’s lap and was massaging the blue-haired boy’s back with his tail, semi-innocently. Yang was trying to get Blake to notice her, and even Weiss had managed to crawl her way closer to Ruby, whether consciously or otherwise.
Everyone was happy.

Everyone had someone else, and once again ghosts of loneliness whispered in Scarlet’s ear. He knew his friends and teammates would always be there for him, but it wasn’t the same. Scarlet wanted someone he could hold hands with; someone whose lap he could sit in; someone whose spine he could run his hand down; someone who would look at him as more than a friend, the way Sun looked at Neptune, or Jaune looked at Pyrrha…

***

No one else noticed Scarlet’s mood, except for the one person whom always noticed everything. Sage furrowed his brows anxiously, but he didn’t know what to do. He’d tried, but his meddling had nearly got Scarlet killed at Yang’s hands. What else could he do?

But of course.

Surely Amazon would know what to do? He was a responsible, married adult, not to mention a former team leader. Plus, talking to Amazon would give Sage an excuse to visit the greenhouse, which was always a bonus.

It was decided then – he would ask Amazon for help.

***

Nora sighed miserably, slumping over the bar.

“What’s wrong?” asked Yang.

“It’s Ren,” Nora replied.

“Of course it is,” said Scarlet.

They were down at the pub again, back to drinking their sorrows away. Well, okay, their sorrows hadn’t actually gone away, nor they hadn’t done that much drinking, but it was an aesthetic that they were fulfilling. All the tables were full, surprisingly, so they’d had to sit at the bar. The bad thing about this was that the bar had those swivel chairs, and Nora loved to swivel, much to everyone else’s chagrin.

“You should do what Jaune did and take the direct approach,” Scarlet advised.

Yang nodded in agreement. “If you don’t tell him, nothing will ever change.”

“But what if he doesn’t feel the same?” Nora replied. “My friendship with Ren is the most important thing in my life, and I don’t want to ruin it with my hopeless feelings.”

“Don’t say that, Nora,” Yang said. “Your feelings aren’t hopeless.”

Just then, Yang flinched just as a man sat down next to her, startled. Eyes narrowed, she turned to him.

“Excuse me?”

“You’re excused, darlin’.” The man winked.

“Did you just touch my butt?” Yang growled.
“So what if I did? You can touch mine, if you want.”

The man was good-looking, as most arseholes tended to be. He was wearing his shirt unbuttoned, and with his groin forward and his legs spread wide.

Scarlet sighed. “Just don’t go there, mate.”

The man misinterpreted what he meant. “What, is this one yours?”

Scarlet sighed again. “Too late.”

“You think she’s his?” Nora asked, laughing. “You think Scarlet has a girlfriend?!”

The man rolled his eyes. “Easy, darlin’, I’m just trying to have fun.”

Yang grinned devilishly. “Okay then, I’ll show you some fun.” She licked her lips. “Turn around.”

The man snorted and stood up, smirking. “How unusual,” he said as he turned his back to them.

Scarlet smiled wryly as Yang kicked the guy’s backside. He tripped across the room before falling flat on his face with an audible smack!

“How do you like that, darlin’?” Yang called, spitting the last word.

The man stumbled to his feet, swearing vehemently. The incident had caused a small commotion within the pub, and with a sinking feeling Scarlet noticed that, unfortunately, this arsehole had friends.

“You trying to start something, bitch!?” the man snarled. “You students all think you’re so tough, don’t you?”

Nora stepped forwards. “Why don’t you come over here and find out how tough we are first hand?”

About twelve other guys in the bar stood up, cracking knuckles.

The lead arsehole’s eyes narrowed. “If it weren’t for your ridiculous weapons, I could take on all three of you myself.”

Nora snorted. “Do you see a weapon on me?”

The bartender spoke up timidly: “Please, no fighting indoors.”

“Shut up,” said the lead arsehole.

The bartender hid behind some bottles nervously.

Yang shook her head. “Boys, boys… Let’s be civil here. Is there a reason we can’t take this outside?”

The man hesitated. “Uh…”

“Good,” said Yang, and she and Nora strode right past him. The men were all too confused to do anything but follow them out the door.

Should Scarlet go? He really didn’t feel like fighting right now, but he would feel bad if he left Yang and Nora to deal with them on their own… Huffing, Scarlet quickly downed the rest of his beer and
exited the pub just as Yang punched the lead arsehole across the jaw.

One of the others tried to punch her, but she ducked and lashed out, kicking him in the stomach. Nora joined in, sweeping a guy and punching him in the groin. Upon seeing that, three of the gang fled straight away.

Scarlet clapped his hands together. “Look like you girls have things sorted here…” he started.

The lead arsehole tried to punch Yang, but she caught his punch and flipped him over her shoulder. Another guy charged at her, but Nora stuck her leg out and he tripped, stumbling into Scarlet. Scarlet pushed him away. The guy spun around, slightly drunk, and made eye contact with him.

“Fuck.”

The drunk swung at Scarlet with a fist, but Scarlet ducked and punched him in the solar plexus, tracing up with his fist to strike him under the chin. The drunk stumbled backwards and Scarlet kicked him for good measure, sending him sprawling across the street.

Scarlet looked over at the girls and saw that there were now only five of the previous twelve idiots left, and he grinned. Nora kicked a guy towards him and Scarlet kicked him back, and then there were only four left. Scarlet rose into the air in a shower of red sparks and picked up two of the guys, bashing their heads together and dropping them onto the floor.

“Hey!” cried one of the remaining two. “That’s cheating!”

Scarlet dropped down to the floor, waving his empty hands. “No weapons, remember?”

Before he could reply, Yang elbowed him in the face and punched him in the gut. He hunched over and Yang kneed him in the head, and now there was only one of them left. However, this one had a knife.

“Dude,” said Yang. “No weapons.”

“Fuck you,” the guy spat, blood dribbling from a cut on his lip.

“No thanks,” Yang sang.

The guy charged wildly, slashing with his knife, but Yang blocked it with her gauntlet, grabbed his wrist and flipped him, twisting his arm behind him until he dropped the knife. She hit his head to knock him out and kicked the knife away, just as they heard police sirens in the distance.

They stood, breathing heavily.

“Well,” Nora panted. “That was fun!”

“If by fun you mean – ”

“Look out!” Yang cried, just as a hooded figure crept up behind Nora. Nora moved, but not quickly enough. The figure’s fist grazed her side and Nora hissed, jumping away.

“You bastard!” Yang yelled, charging. Incredibly, the figure dodged, springing over Yang and sweeping her. Yang hit the floor heavily, groaning. The figure was about to punch Yang, but Scarlet tackled them to the floor.

In the ensuing grapple, Scarlet noticed that – creepily – the figure was wearing a silvery-blue mask, the cool metal etched with scales. The figure was also definitely male, wiry yet viciously strong. He
tried to get the figure into a headlock but he punched Scarlet in the solar plexus, hard. Pain flared and Scarlet let go, retching.

The figure rolled away, jumping to his feet just as Nora punched him. Nora hit the mask, however, and cried out, clutching her hand.

Sirens blared as a police car came racing down the alleyway, and their assailant fled as soon as the police filed out, guns and torches in hand.

Scarlet gasped, fighting for breath, and could only groan as the police helped him and Yang to their feet, asking Nora what the hell had gone on…

Chapter End Notes

So what did you think? Comments and kudos are always appreciated!
It was a pleasant evening. Amber light burned across the sky as the sun set, and a fresh breeze stole the sweat from Sun’s skin. Neptune feinted, but it was the same feint he always did, and Sun knew it was coming. Neptune stamped with his right foot, shoving his elbow as if to punch but then using the momentum to spin into a wheel-kick. Sun caught the kick and pushed forwards, throwing Neptune off his balance and onto the floor.

The blue-haired boy winced as Sun pulled him to his feet, Neptune rubbing his hip.

“Dude, you really need to come up with a new combination,” Sun commented.

“That would work on anyone else except you,” Neptune replied defensively.

Sun breathed in deeply, wiping his brow. “That’s not the point, Neptune,” he said. “What if you have to fight me someday, huh? What then?”

Neptune’s eyes narrowed. “That’s not funny.”

“It’s not meant to be,” Sun replied. “We’re huntsmen-in-training; who knows what we could face?”

His boyfriend sighed. “You’re right, I guess.”

“Course I am. I am your team leader.”

Neptune snorted. “Idiot.”

Sun grinned. “Nerd.”

“Intellectual.”

Neptune yanked his tail, making him flinch.

“Hey!” Sun yelped.

The blue-haired boy smirked mischievously, smacking his lips. “I can’t wait for that lobster!”

To protect his endangered wallet, Sun decided to try something that could either work or really not work. He wrapped his tail around Neptune and pulled him in, flushing their bodies together.

“If you give that lobster a miss, you can have me instead,” Sun whispered in his ear.

Neptune’s breathing hitched, and Sun could feel his heartbeat quicken. Sun nuzzled his neck, relishing the shivers he caused, but then Neptune pushed him away, smiling wryly.

“Sun, I don’t want our first time to be because you’re a cheapskate,” he said.

The faunus huffed indignantly, his plan foiled.

“Although,” Neptune continued, “I could be convinced to order oysters instead.”

Sun stared at him blankly.
Neptune raised his eyebrow. “They’re an aphrodisiac?”

The faunus blinked. “That’s the sex thing, right?”

“Oh my Dust, I fell in love with an idiot.”

“And I fell in love with some creep who wants to drug me into sleeping with him,” Sun retorted.

Neptune blinked. “It’s not…” He shook his head. “Never mind.”

The sky was darkening now, so they headed back to Beacon, their pace leisurely.

“Hey, so there’s me and you, right?” Sun started.

Neptune frowned. “Yeah?”

“And Jaune and Pyrrha, and Ren and Nora?”

“Where are you going with this?”

The faunus scratched his head. “Blake and Yang could be a thing, right? And so could Ruby and Weiss?”

“Wait, what?” Neptune’s eyes widened. “Ruby and Weiss? Since when!?”

Sun waved his hand. “Doesn’t matter. But yeah, you’ve got all them, so who does that leave?”

Neptune thought for a moment, then he pulled a face. “Tell me you don’t mean Sage and Scarlet?”

The faunus nodded. “Uh huh!”

The blue-haired boy just stared at him. “Sage? And Scarlet!?”

Sun snickered. “How funny would it be if our entire team was gay?”

“Oh my Dust.” Neptune covered his eyes. “My parents have just about got to grips with us, but if the rest of our team was gay as well…”

“Nep, you should give them more credit.”

He sighed. “I know…”

Neptune trailed off, because a police car was parked outside the gates of Beacon.

Sun frowned. “Is that for General Ironwood?”

The faunus got his answer when Yang, Nora and Scarlet exited the vehicle. His tail drooped.

***

Sage’s interest in plants and gardening began early on in his life. When he was six, one of his aunts had given him a cactus for his birthday, which he’d proudly placed on his windowsill. Two weeks on, the cactus died from overwatering. Much to his older brothers’ amusement, Sage had been devastated. He took it upon himself to cut away the rot and reroot the plant, and after much painstaking effort, Sage manage to rescue the cactus.

Since then, the garden on his windowsill had grown to hold more than cacti. Unfortunately, a bonsai
was the only thing he’d been able to take with him to Haven (and then to Beacon), so he’d had to entrust his garden to his mother. It was still (mostly) alive.

Despite spending his childhood exploring the swamps and forests of Mistral, never in his lifetime had Sage quite come across a place as wondrous as the greenhouse at Beacon. Flora from all four corners of the world had been painstakingly gathered under a single, glass roof, to a dazzling effect. Explosions of colour abounded in a sea of greens and browns, and the twittering of birds and the buzzing of insects filled the air.

Sage inhaled deeply, feasting on that loamy, earthy smell of fresh soil mingled with a thousand-and-one nectars. Seeing that no one was around, he made his way through the temperate sections and went straight into the tropical zone. As soon as he ducked under the plastic strips that hung from the doorway, he was hit by a wall of heat and humidity, the smells and sounds intensifying. Almost immediately, Sage started to sweat, and he grinned – it could almost have been home.

He found Amazon tucked away amongst the foliage, transplanting some shrubs. His hat was on the floor beside him, gathering dirt, and Amazon had somehow managed to get soil all over himself in the process.

Sage coughed.

Amazon looked around and smiled when he saw him. “Sage! Excellent! You couldn’t help me move these, could you?”

“Sure,” said Sage, kneeling down. “Where to?”

“Over there,” Amazon replied, nodding to an empty plot behind them. “When these grow there won’t be enough room for them here.”

Sage nodded, picking up the transplanting fertiliser. They worked in an amicable silence for a couple of minutes, Amazon humming to himself.

“Amazon?” Sage asked.

“Yep?”

“Uh…” Sage didn’t really know how to start this. “You’re experienced in love, right?”


“No no, I…” Sage snorted. “I realise how ridiculous this is going sound, but… one of my friends is lonely, and I don’t know what I can do.”

Amazon frowned. “Okay… They told you this, then?”

“No, I…” Sage sighed. “My semblance is empathy.”

The older man blinked. “Ah.”

“Yeah…”

Amazon swallowed awkwardly, and his aura blushed. “I’m sorry.”

Sage snorted. “Don’t be.”

“Sorry.”
Sage frowned.

“This friend of yours… do they know they’re lonely?” Amazon asked.

He nodded. “Yes. We tried to set him up on a date, but that didn’t work.”

Amazon shrugged. “The only thing I can suggest is to try again,” he replied. “It’ll be difficult, but… Love is hit and miss; you can’t force it. The only way to find someone is to keep looking.”

Sage blinked, disappointed. “Oh.”

Amazon laughed. “Expecting some sort of secret love potion, were you?”

“Kind of, yeah…”

The huntsman grinned. “You should know better than anyone that emotions are more complicated than that.”

Sage huffed. “Yeah, I guess.”

They finished transplanting all of the shrubs, and Amazon led him further into the greenhouse.

“Sorry I couldn’t be much help,” Amazon apologised, but then froze.

Sage frowned. “What is it?”

Wordlessly, Amazon lifted his hand up to trace the bark of a tree – bark that now had a message carved into it. The words were crudely cut, as if done with a knife that was far too big, and they spelled out four words:

**AND SO IT BEGINS**

Sage swallowed. A chill slipped down his spine and he shivered, even though the greenhouse was sweltering.

“What begins?” Sage asked. His voice came out quieter than he intended, as if it were afraid to sound. “Who wrote that?”

Amazon moved as if to break a spell, and shook his head, his eyes narrowing.

“Merrow.”

***

Despite Scarlet insisting that he needed no help to reach their dorm, Sun and Neptune hovered around him anxiously.

Scarlet glared at them. “I’m fine.”

“Dude, you were beaten up by a masked guy in a hood,” said Neptune. “That is not what I’d call fine.”

“I’ve been beaten up by much worse.”
“Yang and Nora were also beaten up by that masked guy, and we all know how strong they both are,” Sun replied. “Scarlet, this isn’t a joke.”

“Do you hear me laughing?” Scarlet growled.

Sun shook his head angrily. “Whomever this guy is, I think we need to show him not to mess with team SSSN.”

Scarlet hissed in agreement. “I’m going to shoot him so hard…”

“Let’s not rush into anything…” Neptune advised. “First, I think we should find Sage.”

“Oh yeah, where is he?” Scarlet asked, perking up.

Sun stifled a laugh. Neptune ignored him.

“I think he said he was going to the greenhouse,” the blue-haired boy replied.

Scarlet nodded. “Let’s go there, then.”

Sun blinked. “But… we’re nearly at the dorms!”

“I want to see Sage,” Scarlet insisted.

The faunus’ mouth fell open. “Oh my Dust.”

“What?”

Sun shook his head. “Nothing.”

They set off in the opposite direction.

Night had almost fallen, stealing its way across the sky like a thief in a cloak of darkness. The stars shone as if behind a veil, their light muted, and there was no moon in the sky, or if there was it was hidden by the clouds. Beacon’s greenhouse was nestled at the edge forest, situated away from the main campus and on a smallish hill. The path that lead to it was lit by streetlamps, yet the light they shed wasn’t strong enough to banish all the shadows.

“Scarlet?”

Sun’s voice broke the silence loudly, yet Scarlet ignored him. The redhead had stopped and was facing away from them, looking down towards the city of Vale.

Sun coughed. “Scarlet? You okay?”

“I have to go to him,” said Scarlet, although his words were… different. How, Sun couldn’t quite work out, but he had a feeling…

“We’re going to the greenhouse right now,” Sun said. “Sage is –”

“No,” Scarlet shook his head, looking up at the empty sky. “I have to go to him, now. I have to see him.”

The faunus tensed, his tail curling ever so slightly, and Neptune noticed this. His eyes narrowed.

“Scarlet?” Neptune called, walking over. He reached out to put a hand on Scarlet’s shoulder, but
Scarlet hissed at his touch, breaking away and wheeling around. Scarlet crouched, glaring at them with eyes a pale, watery blue.

“Shit.”

Before Scarlet could move, Sun clapped his hands together and three golden clones burst into life, pinning Scarlet down.

“What the hell’s going on?” the faunus growled.

“I don’t know!” Neptune growled back, getting out his scroll. “I’m going to call Roxo –”

Scarlet screamed, a jarring sound, and with a frightening strength he ripped free of Sun’s clones. Sun flinched and swore again, dashing forwards.

“Scarlet, snap out of it!” he yelled.

“I need to go to him!” Scarlet cried, yet his voice sounded as if it was coming from far away. A shower of red enveloped him as he took flight, rising rapidly.

“Neptune!” Sun called. “Drop the scroll and fucking help!”

Neptune glanced up at the sky, noticed Scarlet, then cursed. Taking a running jump, he launched his hand forward as if he was throwing something and a whip of water shot out, wrapping around Scarlet. Scarlet struggled but Neptune froze the whip as he landed, yanking it.

Scarlet was stronger, however. He continued to fight it, straining towards Vale. Neptune tried frantically to pull him to the floor, but he was being dragged along, struggling to keep his feet on the ground.

Sun grabbed a hold of Neptune and together they pulled, heaving with all of their might. Scarlet was kicking and cursing but, ever so slowly, they managed to ground him. As soon as that happened, however, Neptune lost control of his semblance, and the ice shattered.

Before Scarlet could escape again, however, Sun darted forwards, striking him with a fist to the back of the head.

Scarlet collapsed – for now.

Neptune doubled over, panting with his hands on his knees, and he met Sun’s wild eyes. They were too far away from the main campus for anyone to have heard the commotion – too far away for help to come quickly.

“What do we do?” Neptune breathed.

Sun hauled Scarlet over his shoulder, heaving. “The greenhouse,” he huffed. “Amazon should be there.”

Neptune stood up. “I can help carry him –”

“No, go!” Sun said. “Tell them what’s happening, hurry! Before Scarlet wakes up!”

Neptune started running and Sun followed after him, walking as fast as he dared whilst keeping a tight grip on Scarlet’s unconscious form. He was afraid, because he had no bloody clue what was going on. What had happened to Scarlet? What would he do if Scarlet woke up? And the most terrifying of all – what would he do if what happened to Scarlet, happened to him?
“Who’s Merrow?” Sage asked.

“Not now.” Amazon shook his head, getting out his scroll. “I need to tell Ozpin. The greenhouse is far enough away that he might not have got to the students yet, but…”

“Sage?” cried a voice from the other side of the greenhouse. “Sage!? Amazon!?”

Sage swore, breaking into a sprint. “That’s Neptune!”

As they ran, Amazon overtook him, cutting ahead with a mad haste. They met Neptune at the front of the greenhouse, panic written across his face.

“Neptune!” Sage cried. “What’s wrong, what’s happened?”

“Who is it?” Amazon interrupted urgently. “Who’s he got!?”

“Scarlet,” Neptune said. “He just – ”

Sage was out the door in the beat his heart skipped, squinting to see the shapes in the darkness. He couldn’t think, he couldn’t breathe, Scarlet –

“Scarlet!” Sage screamed.

No answer, no reply –

“Sage!” Sun yelled back. Sage skidded to a halt, nearly crashing into the faunus. Sun was carrying Scarlet, the redhead unconscious. His eyes widened. Scarlet…

This was wrong.
This was very, very wrong.

There was… no emotion coming from Scarlet whatsoever – absolutely nothing. Sage couldn’t see his aura at all, and that usually meant that Scarlet was… was…

But no. He couldn’t be.

Sage could sense something, incredibly, unbelievably faint. It was almost as if Scarlet were radiating an invisible emotion, one he couldn’t see but that he knew was there…

“What happened!?” Sage panicked, taking Scarlet from Sun.

“I don’t know!” Sun panted. “He went crazy, all of a sudden. It’s like he’s possessed…”

“It’s mind control,” said Amazon, running up behind them. He was carrying a bow made of black, twisting metal, and had an arrow notched to it, aiming at Scarlet. “Is he alive?”

Sun nodded. “I knocked him out.”
“Good.” Amazon scanned their surroundings. “Get him inside, quickly.”

They did as they were told, Sage setting Scarlet down at the foot of a tree near the entrance to the greenhouse. Neptune reappeared, handing some rope to Amazon, whom used it to tie down Scarlet.

“What’s going on?” Sun asked. “What mind control?”

Amazon was phoning someone, though.

“Ironwood?” he said, speaking into his scroll. “It’s happened.” A pause. “Yes, do that. We’re in the greenhouse. No, I’ve restrained him.” Another pause, longer this time. “Understood.” He hung up.

“What is it?” asked Neptune.

“Doctor Mac Lir should be here soon,” Amazon replied. “Until then, we can only hope Scarlet doesn’t wake up.”

“Yes, but what happened to him?”

Amazon didn’t seem to hear them. The huntsman started pacing anxiously, rubbing his jaw. “Damnit. Damnit, damnit, damnit,” he cursed, muttering to himself. “I should call Roxo…”

“Amazon!” Sage yelled, startling all of them.

Amazon started, but then his eyes softened and he shook his head. “I’m sorry.”

Sage closed his eyes, breathed in deeply, then exhaled, opening his eyes again.

“What happened to Scarlet?” he asked, keeping his voice calm.

A flare of guilt in Amazon’s aura. “He was touched.”

Neptune raised his eyebrow. “Touched?”

“Physical contact is how his semblance activates,” Amazon explained. “Merrow… has the ability to hijack people’s auras and take over their minds.”

Sun swallowed. “Who’s Merrow?”

“A serial killer,” said a voice.

They jumped, spinning around, and Amazon nearly shot Doctor Mac Lir. The doctor held up his gloved hands, his lab coat as spotless as always.

“Honestly, Amazon, we don’t have time for this.”

Amazon lowered his bow. “Thank goodness you’re here,” he said. “Is there anything you can do?”

“First, I’ll need you to tell me how long he’s been staring at you like that,” the doctor said.

“What?”

Without them noticing, Scarlet had regained consciousness, and was just… looking ahead, his pale eyes expressionless, his aura, still empty…

“Scarlet?” Sage cried, bending down. “Can you hear me? You have to snap out of it, Scar.”
“That won’t work,” said the doctor. “We have no way of…”

“Scarlet.” Sage breathed, pouring his semblance into his hands and cupping Scarlet’s face, and… Something stirred.

A flash of colour in his aura – of pain.

Doctor Mac Lir frowned. “What did you just do to him?”

“I’m getting him back,” Sage hissed.

He knew what he had to do.

Some bastard had stolen his precious teammate from him, and Scarlet was determined to steal him back! Keeping his grip on Scarlet’s face, he let loose with his semblance, more than he had ever done before. This was dangerous, so very dangerous, but – Scarlet jerked, and blood started to drip from his nose. However –

Scarlet spat at them just as colour burst back into his aura. “How dare you hurt me – ”

He went slack all of a sudden.

“What did you do!?” Mac Lir cried, rushing forward.

“Sage, you didn’t…” Sun hesitated. “You didn’t break him, did you?”

Sage swallowed as Mac Lir checked for a pulse…

The doctor nodded his head.

*Scarlet was alive.*

More than alive, he was back.

Scarlet looked up slowly, blinking and wincing, yet his eyes were a bright, vivid green. In that moment, the green of his eyes suddenly became Sage’s favourite colour.

Scarlet coughed. “Why…” His voice was hoarse and scratchy. “Why are you holding my face?”

Sun and Neptune breathed sighs of relief, and Sage let go, smiling. Scarlet was more confused than ever, and tried to get up before realising he was tied down.

“What the…?” Scarlet trailed off, looking around him.

“How did you do that?” Amazon frowned.

Sage shrugged. “I used my semblance.”

Amazon scratched his head. “But… you said your semblance was empathy…”

“I understand,” said Mac Lir, bending down to peer into Scarlet’s eyes. “You can hijack people’s auras, too.”
Sage started. “What?!”

“Well it makes sense,” said Neptune. “Aura is emotion, and the only way you can change people’s emotions is if you do something to their auras…”

Scarlet struggled against his bonds. “Wait, what the fuck happened to my aura? Why am I tied to a tree?”

“Someone cut him loose,” said Mac Lir. “I have to examine him.”

Amazon got out a dagger and did so, helping Scarlet to his feet. Scarlet wiped the blood away from his nose, frowning. As he did so, Roxo arrived, accompanied by a grey-haired man wielding a scythe.

“Roxo, Qrow,” Amazon greeted. “Thank goodness.”

Roxo rushed over to the students, frantically checking their eyes. “Who is it?” she cried. “Please, not one of you…”

“It is – was – Scarlet,” said Mac Lir.

Qrow frowned. “Was?”

Roxo grit her teeth. “You’re saying Merrow let him go?”

Amazon shook his head. “No. Sage freed him.”

The man, Qrow, raised his eyebrow. “Who did what, now?”

Just then, however, Ruby burst into the greenhouse in a flurry of rose petals. She was breathing heavily, her eyes wide, and Ren and Jaune were close behind her, all three of them terrified.

Qrow swore. “Ruby?” he asked. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s Yang,” Ruby cried.

“Nora’s gone too,” Ren said, completely shocked. “Both of them, they’re gone.”

Chapter End Notes

Wow, stuff has actually happened! I hope it wasn't too sudden, or out of place or anything... Anyway, guess what? I'm in France for a week! This means it might be some time before the next update... *evil laughter*
Scarlet wasn’t sure what was happening. As soon as Ruby, Ren and Jaune arrived, everyone just – lost it.

Qrow started yelling. Amazon broke down and the students were still just children, completely and utterly at a loss. Ruby and Ren were panicking while Jaune and Neptune tried to reassure them in vain, Sun was trying to break Amazon out of his stupor and Sage was speaking to Scarlet but his head hurt so much –

“Everyone shut up!” Roxo yelled at the top of her voice.

Silence.

Scarlet’s ears were ringing and his vision was swimming; he didn’t know if the two things were related.

Amazon turned on the huntress. “We have to –”

“You have to stop,” Roxo snapped.

“But –”

“It was not your fault, do you hear me?” she said. “It was not your fault, and neither was it yours,” she said to Qrow.

Ruby’s uncle opened his mouth but the protest died at his lips when he saw the shade of Roxo’s eyes. The huntress had assumed command, her tone leaving no room for argument.

“Right,” she said. “Ironwood’s soldiers are securing the perimeter as we speak. Mac Lir and I shall escort the children back to the main campus, where Ozpin and Glynda will meet us. Amazon and Qrow, help Ironwood to scour the campus, then report back to us promptly.”

The men nodded. Sage helped Scarlet to his feet and Roxo gathered them all together as Amazon and Qrow left.

“Are you all alright?” she asked worriedly.

“Yes,” said Ruby.

“No,” said Ren.

Roxo put a hand on Ruby’s shoulder. “It’s okay, honey, you don’t have to lie.”

Ruby’s lip wavered.


“Mind control,” said Sun.

Roxo glared at him. “Not helping!”
“What?!”

“Everyone, just go!” Roxo said, shepherding them all out of the greenhouse and down towards Beacon. “We’ll explain everything, just please keep moving.”

Scarlet’s legs kept on stumbling. His whole body felt spent and weak, as if all of the energy had been sucked out of him. His head was still pounding as if Nora was hitting him with her hammer, except no, Nora was gone.

Gone.

If it hadn’t been for Sage, Scarlet would have been gone, too. Gone where, he didn’t know, and the more he thought about it the more he hyperventilated and Oh My Dust –

“Scarlet,” said Sage.

That single word slowed the frantic beating of Scarlet’s heart, and he breathed deeply, although he had to struggle to get the air down his throat. He stumbled but Sage caught him, and Scarlet leaned into him, his strength, his warmth…

People were talking to him, their voices buzzing all around him at once until Sage chased them away, his voice the one Scarlet hung onto. Scarlet knew that Sage’s semblance was the only thing keeping him going, even as his consciousness dipped and swelled.

Tired, he was so very tired…

Sage was carrying him even before he blacked out, and the last thing he heard was Doctor Mac Lir, saying he needed rest…

***

Ozpin sat before them. He took a long drink from his coffee, then set his mug down. He took off his glasses, wiping them with the sleeve of his jacket, then put them back on. No matter how much the headmaster fidgeted, he could not disguise his anxiety, and that only served to make the rest of them even more anxious. Glynda paced up and down the room, as did Qrow. Ironwood was locking and unlocking his gun, and Amazon was squeezing an arrowhead until Roxo slapped his hands and he put it away (Scarlet noticed then the arrowhead was blunt). Teams SSSN, RWBY and JNPR sat at one end of the table, the tension in the room keeping them quiet. Nora and Yang’s absence was sorely felt, a gaping wound in the very fabric of their lives…

Ozpin sighed. “For what is arguably the first time in my life, I don’t know where to start,” he said.

Sun sat forwards, banging his fist on the table. “How about at the fucking beginning?” he spat.

“Sun!” Sage gasped.

“Oh, fuck off!” the faunus growled. “I’ll swear all I like until someone tells me what the hell is going on!”

“I’m with him on this one,” said Blake. She was wearing all the cool and calm of a person falling apart inside.

“As you wish,” said Ozpin. “I am so sorry this had to happen to you children…”

“Let me tell it,” Amazon interrupted. “It’s our fault, anyway.”
Sage frowned at this. Amazon stood, inhaling deeply.

“At first we were Team AROW,” he started. “Amazon, Roxo, Onda and Winter. I think almost immediately, we realised we had something – we were the best…” Amazon’s voice lilting nostalgically. “At least, that’s what we thought. In our third year… we went on a mission, to the deserts of Vacuo. There…” He swallowed. “We encountered a sphinx.”

Both Amazon and Roxo’s auras were tainted with pain, grief, anger and guilt, and their emotions were so strong Sage was almost overcome. He could already guess what was coming. Scarlet looked at him inquisitively, and Sage smiled weakly.

“The sphinx…” Amazon’s voice wavered, and he closed his eyes. “It killed my teammate, and Roxo’s brother, Onda.”

Roxo flinched, the huntress subconsciously clenching her fist, and despite the terrible things that had happened, not one face in the room was free from pity or anguish. The pain in Amazon’s voice, in Roxo’s eyes…

Weiss was trembling, covering her mouth. “You mean… your brother was killed by a Grimm?” Her whole body was shaking. “Winter… Winter never said…”

“She wouldn’t have,” said Roxo, her voice strained. “It was horrific, not something anyone would want to burden their sister with.”

Ruby tried to comfort Weiss, but Sage could see that the heiress was beginning to feel as if she barely knew her sister at all. Winter Schnee had hidden so much, built so many walls around herself…

“We were never the same again,” Amazon continued. “I stepped down, Winter took over as leader and… after a while, we got a new teammate: Merrow.”

Scarlet sat up, and Sage’s eyes narrowed.

Amazon shook his head. “We could never have known… just how sick and twisted he was. He… Well, we don’t know what happened. He just one day snapped and started killing people.” Amazon looked up. “Merrow can control minds, you see. Through physical contact he can take over your aura, and your eyes go a pale, lifeless blue.”

“Is that what happened to my sister?” cried Ruby. “Has she been possessed by this Merrow?”

Amazon nodded. “I’m afraid so.”

“Are they going to die?” Ren hissed. “You said Merrow killed people; is Nora going to die!?”

Qrow shook his head. “He’ll keep them alive for awhile yet, to taunt us.”

“But why?” Pyrrha exclaimed. “Why is he doing all this? And why didn’t you stop him sooner!?”

“He’s a psychopath,” said Ironwood. “He’s completely insane.”

“His acting was so good he even managed to fool me until it was too late,” Ozpin admitted, ashamed.

“So…” Ruby shivered, and Qrow put his hand on her head, all he could do to comfort her. “Yang and Nora… they’re with Merrow?”
Amazon nodded. “From what you’ve told us, there’s no doubt about it.”

“You said Merrow needs to touch someone to control them,” Jaune spoke up. “When did he touch Nora and Yang?”

“And Scarlet,” Sun spoke up. Startled heads turned to look at them, and Ren stared at Scarlet with a mixture of wrath and disbelief.

“Merrow possessed Scarlet, but we restrained him,” said Neptune. “Sage broke him free.”

Ren jumped up, grabbing Sage by the shoulders. “How did you do that!” There was a haggard, desperate look in his eyes.

“I… I pushed Merrow out of his aura…” Sage stuttered, rattled by the gale of emotions wracking the room.

“Save Nora!” Ren cried. “Please, you have to save Nora!”

Sun stepped in between them, holding Ren back. “Hold on, dude, we don’t even know where Nora is.”

“Then find her!” Ren turned to the adults. “You have to find them!”

“We will,” said Ozpin. “First, however, you must tell us everything if we are to find out how Merrow got to you.” The professor was observing Scarlet carefully.

Scarlet gulped, his throat dry. “I… I think I know what it was.”


Hesitantly, Scarlet told them about the barfight, and about the mysterious stranger that had nearly beat the crap out of them.

“Oh my Dust,” Pyrrha breathed.

Amazon furrowed his brows. “We’ll start our search at that pub, then. It is likely that the people you picked a fight with were already under Merrow’s control in some form.”

Ren stood up, flexing and glowering darkly. “I’ll string them up by their insides if they don’t talk.”

“Hold on,” Glynda interrupted, “you children aren’t going anywhere!”

“What!” Ren cried.

“Glynda is right,” said Ozpin. “This is too dangerous for you to be a part of.”

“We’re already a part of it!” Blake hissed.

“I know what you’re all going through, believe me, I do,” their headmaster replied. “However, it’s time you left this to the adults.” His tone was final.

“I’ve already sent my men to investigate that pub as we speak,” Ironwood promised.

Ruby clenched her fists. “I don’t like this.”

“None of us do,” said Weiss, “but it’s our only choice. What good would we be if Merrow touched
us, too?"

Sun grit his teeth. “Damn it.”

“We’ve tripled security around Beacon,” said Ozpin. “Just to be safe, however, all students will be sleeping in the canteen tonight.”

“But – ”

“We will rescue them,” said Roxo. “Please. You have to trust us.”

Jaune breathed in deeply. “Okay,” he said. “We’ll trust you.”

The huntress smiled. “Thank you.”

Chapter End Notes

I have returned! And so has the tension, I hope.
“You’re here early,” said Winter, raising her eyebrow.

“So are you,” Amazon replied.

“Shouldn’t you be with Roxo?” Winter asked, concerned.

Amazon shook his head. “She said she wanted to be alone for a while.”

Winter shook her head, but said nothing. Amazon looked away. Winter Schnee was dressed up, sparing no effort for her new role as team AROW – no – team WRAM’s leader. She wore her uniform so well that it could have been said to be part of her, her rapier polished and strapped smartly to her waist. Her hair was freshly cut and, unusually for Winter, she was wearing makeup. Amazon supposed it was more to mask her face than to show it off.

Amazon was clad in his usual attire, although this time with a jacket. It was a size too big for him, so that the sleeves covered his hands and the scars on his palms. After… Onda… Amazon had started obsessively sharpening his arrowheads, then clenching them in his hands until he felt a sharp, twisting pain of a different kind, momentarily chasing away the guilt that hounded him. In a middle of a particularly bitter fight, Roxo found out. She and Winter proceeded to confiscate both his arrows and every other sharp object they had, and all of a sudden there was another thing he was having therapy for…

Stop it, he thought, chiding himself. They’re only doing what’s best for you. You can’t be doing this, not when you’re about to meet the newest member of your team.

Onda’s replacement.

No.

No, you can’t think that!

“Amazon?” said Winter.

He shook his head angrily. “I’m fine.” He clenched his fists, but there was nothing to hold in his hands.

They were at the airport, both anxiously and eagerly awaiting the flight that would carry Merrow Ceiren from Atlas to the shores of Vale. The fourth member of their team, the one that would complete them, or at the very least, that would allow them to graduate.

Merrow Ceiren.

A fierce intellect, if not so much of a fierce fighter. Ingenuitive, ingenious, infallible… On paper, they
could not have asked for a better teammate. In real life, that remained to be seen…

“The plane’s landed,” Winter said.

“Yeah.”

People flocked to arrivals, waiting for others. So many voices, so many faces… There – was it him? A hooded figure, towing behind him two massive suitcases stacked one on top of the other. His hoodie was blue, and Amazon’s breathing hitched before he realised that it was a much lighter shade of blue than the indigo that Onda used to love.

Winter stepped forwards. “Merrow Ceiren?” she asked.

The boy looked up, grinning. “Yep! That’s me!” He extended his hand. “You must be Miss Winter Schnee, correct?”

Winter shook his hand firmly, smiling. “Correct.”

Merrow turned. “And you must be Amazon Sangal. It’s a pleasure to meet you!”

Amazon shook his hand. “The pleasure’s mine.”

Amazon faltered, remembering his scars too late. Merrow frowned briefly at his touch, but said nothing. Merrow’s hands were soft and free of callouses, not the hands of a fighter. Still, perhaps it wasn’t a fighter they needed. His hair was a dark, milky grey that spilled out from underneath his hood, and his skin was bookishly pale, as Amazon had expected. Merrow’s eyes were enthralling, however, a clear, watery blue with a ring of green around the centre. However, the green was more prominent in his left eye than his right, which lent a fey-like quality to his face.

“We shall take your to the dorms, first, so you can unpack,” said Winter. “Then, if you would like we can show you around Beacon and Vale?”

“Yes, please!” Merrow said cheerily. “That sounds great!”

They set off with Merrow still lugging his suitcases behind him.

“Would you like some help with those?” Amazon asked politely.

Merrow grinned. “Thanks!”

Amazon took a suitcase and heaved, his muscles straining. “Dust, what do you have in here!?”

The grey-haired boy shrugged. “Just books and stuff.”

Amazon snorted.

They stepped outside, and Amazon covered his eyes until he spotted Winter, waiting for them by the taxi she’d called. Merrow gazed across the streets, sighing.

“This is good,” he said absent-mindedly.

Amazon frowned. “I’m sorry?”

Merrow smiled. “It’s a fresh start, a chance to make friends.” He turned, and Amazon saw something indescribable swimming in his eyes. “Do you think people will like me, at Beacon?” Merrow asked. “Do you think I’ll be able to make friends there?”
Amazon blinked, taken aback. “I’m… sure you’ll be just fine.” He hesitated. “Don’t you have any friends back at Atlas?”

Merrow shook his head. Winter was calling to them impatiently, and just as they turned to go Merrow exposed the side of his neck, moving his hair out of the way to reveal three scars – no, not scars, gills.

Amazon’s eyes widened.

“Some people don’t like me being able to breathe underwater,” said Merrow quietly.

“What… But…” Amazon stammered, glancing at Winter, who hadn’t seen. “Your file didn’t say you were a faunus!”

A pause. “Because I didn’t want it to.”

***

Amazon woke up, shivering. It was cold, the window open, and Roxo had taken over most of the bed as usual, spreading in her sleep. She stirred now, though, moments before their alarm went off. As soon as her scroll started blaring, Roxo’s eyes snapped open. His wife groaned, rolling over.

“Bloody morning,” Amazon heard her mutter.

He got up, stretching, then leant down to kiss Roxo good morning. “Wake up,” he said gently. “We have work to do.”

Roxo sat up. “I know.” She yawned loudly.

Amazon pulled on his shorts, and he could feel Roxo watching him, tracing the tattoos across his skin with her eyes.

“Are you sure it’s wise to get Sage involved in this?” she asked him.

Amazon’s eyes narrowed. “Sage’s empathy might be the only thing that can counteract Merrow’s mind control,” he said.

“He’s just a student.”

Amazon swallowed. “I know.”

“What if something happens to him?” she asked.

His breathing stilled. “We’ll make sure it doesn’t.”

***

“It’s my fault,” said Scarlet, hunched up on his bed. “I should have made them run away. I should have…”

“You should have what, talked Yang and Nora out of a fight?” Sun retorted. “There’s nothing you could have done.”

Scarlet clenched his fists, his hair hiding his eyes. “It’s my fault,” he said, his voice trembling.

The faunus sighed, crouching down. Gently, Sun uncurled Scarlet’s hands and grasped them,
looking into his friend’s eyes.

“It’s not your fault, Scar,” Sun said. “Do you understand? It wasn’t your fault.”

“I…” Scarlet sniffed. “He was in my head.”

Sun bit his lip in sympathy.

“He was in my head, and there was nothing I could do – I couldn’t move, couldn’t scream…”

Scarlet’s entire body shook. Neptune came over and sat beside Scarlet, placing a hand on his shoulder. Sage leaned against the wall, watching them. After a few moments of silence:

“I thought you were dead,” said Sage, his voice low.

Scarlet met his eyes. Sage swallowed.

“For a moment, I thought you were dead.”

“I’m not,” said Scarlet. Only two words were spoken, but they carried so much more meaning than either of them could have meant…

A knock on the door.

“I’ll get it.” Neptune stood up. He opened it to reveal Roxo, her husband standing behind her.

Sun stood up quickly, tensing. He moved so that his body was in between them and Scarlet. “Is something wrong?”

“We’d like to speak with Sage, briefly,” the huntress said.

Sage frowned. “Why?”

“Perhaps that’s better discussed in private,” Amazon replied.

“Bullshit,” Sun hissed. “If you have something to say you say it to all of us.”

Sage nodded in agreement.

Roxo sighed apologetically. “May we come in, then?”

Neptune stepped aside, and closed the door behind them. Roxo and Amazon walked into the centre of the room and stood there in silence, unsure of how to start.

Amazon coughed. “We – ”

“You want Sage to help you in your investigation,” said Neptune.

Roxo started. “How did you know!”?

“It’s obvious,” the blue-haired boy replied. “Sage is the only one whom can counteract Merrow’s ability. It’s perfectly logical for you to have him along with you.”

“Well… yes.”

Sun grit his teeth. He didn’t have to look at Sage to know his teammate would say yes – any of them would have.
“I’ll do it,” said Sage.

“I’m going, too,” said Sun.

“Same,” said Neptune.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Amazon shook his head. “It’s too dangerous; we wouldn’t be asking Sage for help if it wasn’t absolutely necessary.”

“We can – ”

“If Merrow gets a hold of you, Neptune, he could quite literally drown the entire city.” Roxo met their eyes. “Neither of you are coming with us.”

Sun growled, but Sage placed his hand on the faunus’ shoulder. “Leave it, Sun,” he said. “They’re right.”

Sun sighed, dejected.

Neptune clapped hands with Sage. “Bring Yang and Nora back to us, okay?”

Sage nodded, his eyes narrowed.

Amazon opened the door, but Scarlet stood.

“Don’t,” he said, his voice breaking.

Sage flinched, biting his lip.

“Don’t leave me,” Scarlet whispered, his eyes haunted. “Please.”

Sun froze, didn’t know what to say.

“I’ll be back,” Sage said.

“You don’t know what it’s like!” Scarlet yelled all of a sudden, startling everyone. He lurched forwards, gripping Sage by the shoulders madly. “Just a touch, that’s all it takes! Then you’re dead, trapped inside your own soul!”

“He can’t hurt me…”

“You don’t know that,” Scarlet spat, trembling, afraid. “You can save others, but yourself? We all know you can’t see your own emotions.”

“I…” Sage stuttered, his words tripping over themselves.

“We’ll keep him safe,” Roxo interrupted, trying her best to reassure Scarlet.

“Oh you will, will you?” Scarlet laughed. “You were his teammates, how do we know you aren’t under his spell right now? Huh?”

Sun’s heart skipped a beat, and frost started curling around Neptune’s fists…

Roxo stepped backwards.

She stood very, very still, and a darkness passed through her eyes, a legion of howling demons. Amazon clenched his fists around that blunt arrowhead, his knuckles going white.
Then:

“Merrow can only control someone once,” Roxo said.

A heartbeat.

“What?”

“Once he touches someone, he has control over them for a week at most,” said Amazon. “Then – they’re free, and once you’ve been under Merrow’s control he can’t get to you again.”

Neptune paused. “Does that mean… you’ve both…?”

“Been under his control?” Amazon finished. “Yes.”

“What…” Sun hesitated. “What did he make you do?”

“Silly, inconsequential things,” Amazon replied. “We didn’t believe what he said he could do, at first, so he made me buy him lunch and made Roxo scream at some seagulls.”

“That… seems rather childish,” said Sun.

“I screamed so loudly the seagulls dropped dead out of the sky,” Roxo said quietly.

“Oh.”

The huntress put her hand on Scarlet’s arm. “We will keep Sage safe,” she promised.

Scarlet let go. “I…”

Much to Scarlet’s surprise, Sage hugged him, completely engulfing the smaller man.

“I’ll be alright,” Sage whispered, and Sun couldn’t help but feel as if he was eavesdropping on something private. Scarlet mumbled something in reply to which Sage smiled, letting go.

“It’s settled, then,” he said.

Normally, Sun would have hugged Sage goodbye, but he felt awkward considering how Sage and Scarlet had hugged just moments ago. He tried to go in for a sort of handshake, but Sage pulled him in for a hug anyway, crushing his arm. After Sage hugged Neptune, too, the four of them stood in silence, Roxo and Amazon having stepped outside, waiting for them to say their goodbyes.

“Bring them back,” said Neptune.

Sage clenched his fist, resolute. “I will.”

“Make us proud.” Sun grinned.

“That goes without saying.”

Scarlet opened his mouth but he didn’t know what to say. Sage smiled, and Scarlet realised he didn’t have to say anything at all. Sun’s tail poked Sage fondly.

“Go,” the faunus said.

Sage nodded, then left, closing the door behind him.
So I'm moving to uni next week, which should be great, but unfortunately it means updates might take longer than normal for the next month or so. I don't want to rush writing, but I'll try my best! As always, thanks for reading this far, and thank you so much for your kudos and comments! (*^ ω ^*) Honestly, they're so encouraging it's incredible.
Ruby hugged Zwei close to her, burying her face in his fur. She breathed in and Zwei, sensing this, wriggled around to lick the tears from her face. His tongue was rough against her skin, and only made her face wetter.

“They’ll rescue her,” said Weiss. “I’m sure of it.”

Ruby sniffed in response.

“Yang’s strong,” Blake added, looking from Ruby to Weiss. “She’ll break free of this guy’s control, right?”

No one answered.

Ruby said nothing because she was afraid that if she did, she would fall apart into a thousand and one pieces, each of them screaming and crying something different. It’s your fault. It couldn’t have been your fault. Break down and cry. Give in. Stand up and be responsible.

Lead.

Ozpin had chosen her as team leader because he’d seen something in her, yet here she was, crying silently into her family’s dog. Hiding her tears, because she had to appear strong. She had to set an example, to be the rock the rest of her team could lean on – like Yang.

Ruby set Zwei down, wiping her eyes.

“We’re going to be alright,” she said, trying to convince herself that what she said was true. “Yang will come back to us, and Nora, too.”

Weiss met Ruby’s eyes and nodded reassuringly. “Yes,” she said.

Blake hummed in agreement.

Just then, there came a knock on the door.

“Ruby?”

Ruby’s eyes widened. “Dad!?”

No sooner had her father opened the door than Ruby was hugging him.

Taiyang Xiao Long had already lost her mother, and for a moment, when Ozpin had informed her they’d alerted Tai about the situation, Ruby had been afraid depression would surge up and drown her father again, pulling him under to a place where she couldn’t reach him.

Her fear had been unfounded, however – here he was.

Harried yet determined, unshaved yet steely-eyed. This was the father she knew, and the one she needed right now. His scent reminded her so much of home – and of Yang – that it gave her courage in a bizarre, cliché kind of way. She let him go, standing up and brushing herself off.
“You girls doing okay?” Tai asked carefully.

Blake nodded.

“We’re doing as best we can,” said Weiss. “It’s just frustrating to be powerless.”

“I know.” Tai nodded in acknowledgement, his expression grim. “Don’t worry, though. Your Uncle Qrow and I are part of the team that’s going to bring Yang back.”

***

Roxo and Amazon led Sage to the gates of Beacon, where two others were waiting for them. One was the grey-haired man from the yesterday, Qrow, whom Sage had learned was Ruby’s uncle; the other Sage hadn’t seen before, but felt as if he recognised him nonetheless. Both of their auras were anxious and tinged with fear, although they were more mature in their emotions, more experienced and in control.

“Qrow Branwen and Taiyang Xiao Long,” Amazon said to Sage as they approached.

Xiao Long…?

“She’s Ruby and Yang’s father,” Sage realised. “Is it wise to have him on the team?”

There was no doubt Tai was an experienced huntsman, but his own daughter had been kidnapped. The kind of emotional stress that would put someone under…

“You can read emotions, can’t you?” said Amazon. “If any one of us gets carried away, tell us.”

Sage nodded apprehensively. “Right…”

As they joined them, Qrow raised his eyebrow. “What’s the deal, Amazon?” he said. “Why’s this kid with us?”

“Sage is the only person we know that can counteract Merrow’s semblance,” Roxo explained.

“Oh, you’re that kid,” said Qrow.

Taiyang started. “Is it true?” he asked. “You can save them?”

Sage shrank back hesitantly. “I think… maybe?”

The flashes of hope that had suddenly flared in Tai’s aura made Sage uncomfortable, for they were all founded on him. What if he couldn’t repeat what he’d done with Scarlet? What if, because of him, things only got worse? What if – as Scarlet said – Merrow took control of Sage, too?

“Right,” Roxo interrupted. “Remember that message that someone carved at the greenhouse?”

They did.

“Well, one of the botanists didn’t come into work, today. She hasn’t answered any of our calls, either.” Her eyes narrowed. “Ironwood’s securing her flat now.”

Qrow nodded. “Then let’s not stand around here all day.”

***
“I don’t know what we’ll find inside,” Ironwood warned as they stood outside the door to the flat. It was a plain door, white and nondescript.

“What if she runs?” Tai asked.

“My men are surrounding the building,” Ironwood replied. “She has nowhere to go.”

She was Vera Annis, yet no one was saying her name. Sage didn’t know why the others were avoiding it, but him? His semblance had a short range, but it was large enough to convince him that there was no one in the flat.

“I don’t think there’s anyone inside.”

Ironwood frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I can’t sense any auras,” Sage explained.

“So it’s not just emotions, but auras that you can sense?” the general said, somewhat sceptically.

“Aura is emotion,” Sage retorted.

“Maybe she’s good at hiding her emotions,” Qrow suggested.

Sage shook his head. “Hiding them doesn’t work.”

Qrow raised his eyebrow. “Aren’t you exaggerating a little?”

“No,” said Sage. “But you don’t believe me, anyway. You’re anxious, restless and irritated. You remember brief specks of joy but are overwhelmed by sadness and a deeper, darker guilt that makes you hate yourself and angry with others. Now you’re surprised, shocked even, and – ”

“Stop it,” said Qrow.

He did. “Sorry.”

Qrow was watching him guardedly. “No harm done, I guess…”

Roxo smirked. “He’s just pissed you proved him wrong.”

Ironwood coughed. “Well, regardless of what you say, we need to investigate.”

They went ahead.

The botanist’s flat was flawless.

The floors and surfaces were spotless, and the furniture had been positioned so precisely as to be obsessive. The windows looked freshly cleaned, and even the hinges on the doors had been oiled. Everything was perfect – too much so. As they walked through the rooms, Sage had the insidious impression that the flat was so clean it was wrong. In the kitchen, everything was arranged and/or hung up by size, then colour order, even the cutlery. In the bedroom the books on the bookshelf were all organised in alphabetical order and placed so that they were exactly perpendicular to the shelf and in line with every other book. It was almost as if he was standing inside a dollhouse, with every detail decided and controlled down to the tiniest speck of dust. He was suddenly overcome with the irrational fear that he had buttons for eyes, and had to rub his eyes to be sure they were still there.

“I don’t like it,” Roxo whispered. “It’s too quiet.”
Qrow opened the door to the bathroom, and swore.

They all came rushing.

“What is it?” Amazon cried.

“Don’t let the kid look – ”

Too late.

The bathroom was glisteningly white, pristine except for the actual bath. The tub was full to the brim with water, undisturbed but for the body that lay beneath it, submerged. Pale, bloated skin; glazed, lifeless eyes…

Sage quickly left the bathroom, covering his mouth with his fist. He breathed in deeply, shuddering. This…

“She’s dead,” said Taiyang, although that much was obvious.

“Merrow?” Sage asked.

Amazon swallowed, then nodded. “She… Vera… wouldn’t have killed herself.”

“Shit.”

Qrow was the last one to leave the bathroom, and he shut the door behind him as he left, it clicking softly. A grieving silence hung in the air, mingled with a sense of defeat. Now all of the cleaning made sense – there was no evidence, no trace. Nothing.

“What do we do now?” Taiyang asked.

Roxo clenched her fist. “We go to the pub where the fight happened, see if we can find any of those idiots that started it.”

They nodded.

“I’ll have my soldiers search the flat more thoroughly, and alert her next of kin,” said Ironwood.

They left, although fifteen minutes later Sage still felt as if he were trapped within the dollhouse, suffocating helplessly. He shivered.

***

Knowing Yang, Nora and Scarlet, Sage wasn’t surprised to find that the pub they frequented, while not being the seediest of places, definitely wasn’t reputable. Filthily cheap alcohol coupled with moderately cheap entertainment made a popular combination, so that when they entered almost every seat was already taken. A multitude of mostly male, mostly older faces watched them suspiciously, some of them outright hostile. Their auras were burning with shades of red and yellow, with the occasional tinge of depressed blue. All but the bartender were swallowed by the brown glimmer of intoxication, and Sage just knew there was going to be trouble.

“May I help you?” asked the bartender. It was polite, yet his tone suggested somewhat apologetically that they should probably leave.
“Yesterday night some students from Beacon got into a fight with a group of men,” Ironwood said, his voice gravely and weighing with authority. “Are any of those men present tonight?”

Sage watched the crowd, watched as confusion blossomed, as fear and worry spread and anger simmered away. He watched as friends glanced at each other, as the dark green of suspicion took hold. In one of the men closer to them, fear turned to panic, fuelled by guilt.

Sage nodded to him, and Qrow walked over.

“Pal – ” he started, but the man bolted.

As he stood up he tripped over his chair, fell over and cried out. Qrow sighed. The man picked himself up frantically and for whatever reason decided his best escape route would be to try and barge past the huntsmen and huntress. Qrow stepped aside and Tai held out his fist, which the man ran straight into. He doubled over, and several others in the bar got to their feet aggressively.

Tai dragged the man outside.

“Don’t mind us.” Roxo grinned. One of the man’s friends growled at her, hunching up threateningly.

“Anyone who interferes will be arrested,” Ironwood warned, and it seemed as if several of those in the pub now recognised who he was. They sat down again, muttering despondently.

Outside, Tai slammed the man against a wall further down the alleyway.

“Where’s my daughter?” he yelled.

The man spat at him. “I don’t know nothing!”

Tai shook him. “WHERE IS SHE!?”

“I dunno where that blonde bitch is!” the man yelled. “Why the fuck’d I wanna mess with her!?”

It was clear that their suspect was drunk, yes, but still sober enough to make the connection between Tai and Yang.

Tai growled and raised his fist, but instead of punching him the fist burst into flames, licking at Tai’s skin hungrily but without burning him. Tai held the fire in front of the guy’s face, just close enough for his hair to start sizzling. The guy gaped at it with wide eyes, trembling.

“If you don’t tell me where she is right now – ”

Sage placed a hand on Tai’s shoulder.

“Come now, there’s no need for that,” he said smoothly. He grabbed the other man’s arm. “We can all be friends here, right?”

Sage bled all of the rage, fear and hatred from both of them, replacing it with trust, respect and amity. Both men instantly relaxed, and Tai let go of the suspect.

Qrow whistled, and Ironwood raised his eyebrow.

“Now then,” said Sage. “Sir, what’s your name?”

“Ben,” the man said.
“Right then, Ben, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Yeah…”

Sage smiled. “Why did you run?”

“’Cause I was the one that hit on her, you know? It wasn’t worth it, though.” He rubbed his arm.
“She beat us pretty good.”

“That must have been tough, huh?” said Sage. “What about the guy that beat them, though? Where did he come from?”


“Oh.” Sage frowned. “Do you know anything about him at all?”

Ben scratched his head. “I think… one of my mates mentioned something about seeing a guy like him down by that old dust workshop. You know, the one by the river?”

Ironwood nodded.

“Anything else?” Sage asked.

The man shook his head.

Sage let him go. “Thanks,” he said. “You’ve been a great help.”

The man frowned, stumbled around a bit, then staggered back inside the pub, dazed.

“What you did to him, it’s not permanent, is it?” Roxo asked.

He shook his head. “No. He’ll be back to his usual self in a couple of hours or so.”

“Huh.”

For a moment, Sage thought he felt someone else with them, but – no, it was nothing.

Ruby met Ren and Jaune behind their dorms, curious. Neither of the boys were the type to sneak out at night, although considering all that had happened recently, that was probably a good thing.

“What’s up?” she asked casually.

Jaune hesitated, coughing awkwardly. She noticed both of them had their weapons with them, and was glad she’d had the intuition to do the same. Crescent Rose was tucked discreetly under her hood.

Ren glanced around them to make sure they were alone. His eyes narrowed.

“We’re going to get Nora and Yang back,” he said, his voice low.

“What!?” Ruby cried, then clapped her hand over her mouth.

No one had heard.

“How!?!” she whispered, her eyes wide.
“Ren’s been using his semblance to follow the huntsmen all day,” Jaune explained. “They’ve found Merrow’s hideout, and are planning on attacking tonight.”

“Then we should leave it to them,” Ruby said, although she couldn’t keep the doubt from her voice.

“What if they need our help?” said Ren. “Your speed and my invisibility could be the deciding factor.”

“They’re our friends, Ruby!” Jaune added. “I know we promised we wouldn’t, but we have to do something!”

“Well…” Ruby hesitated, then she remembered what Yang would do if the situation was reversed. “Okay,” she said.

Ren nodded. “Good.”

Chapter End Notes

So I’ve moved into uni, which means (maybe) more regular updates! Hooray! :) Sorry this chapter took so long, I had a little bit of writer's block. Anyway, I hope you enjoyed it! This fic is quite different from The Sun and the Sea God, both in terms of structure and actual plot. I don't know. Are you guys okay with this darker storyline? Do you like it/not like it? Any thoughts or feedback? Things are getting more intense, with a lot more different points of view. Is this okay, or is it a bit of a mess? (You can tell the truth, don't worry.) Once again, thank you for reading! :) (If you spot any mistakes, give me a shout. I'll appreciate it!)
There were three reasons they were infiltrating Merrow’s base at night.

The first was that it had taken most of the day to scout out the abandoned workshop. Supposedly empty, the ‘Black Horse’ was, for all appearances, a thriving dust shop. After some investigating, they’d found out that the place had recently changed owners, and the new proprietor had actually managed to forge a contract with the Schnee Dust Company. (The Schnee Dust Company had been unavailable for comment.) Despite this, it hadn’t been difficult to discover that the Black Horse had suddenly acquired a large taskforce over a matter of days, most of them locals whom were down on their luck. To make matters worse, most of the taskforce were just regular employees, no mind-control involved. There was, however, one guy that piqued their interest: dark skinned, but with shockingly blue eyes. Further efforts revealed that his eye colour was not a mutation but in fact Merrow.

The second reason they were attacking at dark was that it was the largely unpossessed taskforce that provided the security, and the vast majority of them were human. They wouldn’t be able to see in the dark, and Ironwood had supplied the rescue team with night-vision goggles.

The third reason, as Qrow put it, was to add atmosphere.

They hugged what shadows they could find, and Sage shook his head slightly, trying to get used to the green glow that the night-vision goggles cast upon everything. It was strange – normal light was green, yet he could still see other colours in peoples auras. Funny, the way that worked. They were crouching on a rooftop three buildings away from the dust workshop, whilst Ironwood was gathering his soldiers further back. Because of the river that cleaved the city in front of them, infiltrating the building was trickier than it otherwise would have been. Sage found himself wishing Neptune was with them, then chided himself for being so stupid.

“Nervous?” Taiyang asked. Ruby’s father was steely-eyed, his voice low yet calm.

Sage nodded in admittance.

Taiyang smiled grimly. “Same. Waiting’s hell, isn’t it?”

It was. They couldn’t do anything without Ironwood’s go-ahead, for without that they wouldn’t have the advantage of Atlesian troops to provide support and cover at a moment’s notice. Furthermore, Ironwood was the one that had the authority to cut the electricity to the building.

Sage’s scroll was on silent, but he could have sworn it kept buzzing. Perhaps it was just his muscles twitching in anticipation? He snorted, not being allowed to check it but already guessing at what he would see. His teammates would all be thinking of him, yet only Scarlet would be annoying enough to actually text him.

“You don’t know what it’s like!” Scarlet yelled all of a sudden, startling everyone. He lurched forwards, gripping Sage by the shoulders madly. “Just a touch, that’s all it takes! Then you’re dead, trapped inside your own soul!”
Scarlet – the thought of him brought with it a grey determination to save Yang and Nora.

They had to.

“Does everyone know their roles?” Roxo asked.

They nodded. As soon as Ironwood cut the power, they would break in with all the stealth they could muster. Sage was to use his semblance to deal with any guards they came across. Hopefully they would be able avoid any conflict this way, but if conflict did arise, Qrow and Roxo would act as the vanguard, while Tai was to be their tank and Amazon would provide support. Sage was to stay by Amazon at all times, no matter what happened. If Amazon were to be compromised – run.

“Good,” said the huntress. “As soon as the hostages are secured, get them to Dr Mac Lir immediately.”

“What?” Sage hesitated, although he could already guess the answer.

“You saw what happened to Scarlet, and he was only under Merrow’s control for a couple of hours,” Amazon said. “Yang and Nora have been under Merrow’s control for over a day now. One can only imagine the kind of strain that will put the mind under.”

Tai tensed, gritting his teeth, and Qrow’s eyes narrowed.

Here Sage was, in a team with fully trained warriors, and yet a significant part of their plan rested on him. If they could avoid confrontation, the operation would run a lot smoother, a lot quicker and, most importantly, a lot safer. That was a big ‘if’, though…

Roxo’s com buzzed, and she nodded.

“Ironwood’s ready,” the huntress whispered.

The turned back to the building. There were two guards either side of the door, both of them discreetly armed. They were bored, chatting to each other while their eyes scanned the twisting shadows cast by the light from the windows behind them.

All of a sudden, the lights within the building failed.

Darkness came crashing down on them, and the guards jumped. They cried out in alarm but Roxo whistled and a window on the other side of the workshop broke, shattering the silence. The guards brandished their guns with surprised yelps, rushing round.

All five of them dashed through the doors as fast as they could, Roxo and Qrow darting out ahead. There was one more guard inside the entrance but he caught his gun in his holster as he tried to pull it out, tugging frantically. Qrow knocked him out with a swing of his fist, and the guard slumped to the floor. Tai helped him drag the unconscious guard under a desk, and all of them ducked into another corridor, just as more guards came running from inside, accompanied by the sweeping beams of torches. They all ran outside, however, and then – the coast was clear.
The tension clawed at her nerves, digging in with its cold fingers. She struggled to keep her breathing steady and her head clear, and her fingers gripped Crescent Rose with a furious fear.

Breathe.

Glass shattered and she flinched, yet remained still. Made no sound.

Breathe.

Shouting, running, and then she saw the shadows of her father and uncle leap down and dart inside the workshop. Beside her, Jaune and Ren tensed.

“Let’s go,” said Ruby, but just then several guards rushed out, securing the entrance.

She swore.

“I can make us invisible until we get past them,” Ren whispered.

“Do it,” said Jaune.

Ruby felt the air shiver as Ren’s semblance covered them, and they ran for inside. They needn’t have, yet time was pressing down on all of them. Her sister’s time, and Nora’s.

They dodged out of the way of the torchlight and slipped behind the guards, making it inside. Ren’s semblance was designed for hiding from Grimm, and so for them it was imperfect. It hid them from sight, but nothing else. They could still be heard, smelt, felt – and their shadows were still visible.

Ren knew how to work with these setbacks, and had done so to follow the adults in secret. Ruby and Jaune, although they tried their best, didn’t, so they had to make up for it by keeping constant vigil, both against their friends and enemies alike. Ruby knew that if her father discovered she was here, she would be dead.

The inside of the workshop was… quiet. On the surface it had closed for the night, but soon you realised that there was a lot more going on than there should have been. Firstly, the guards. Ruby and the other two pressed up against a wall, sucking their breaths in as three men ran past, one of them speaking on a radio. Apparently, they still hadn’t figured out that Roxo’s distraction had been a distraction, and were desperately trying to reconnect the power.

That was another thing – no light.

It took a couple of seconds for Ruby’s eyes to adjust to the murk, yet the further in they went, away from the windows, the darker it got. Ren stepped out in front, treading carefully.

“Follow me,” he said. “Step only where I do.”

How Ren was navigating his way down the black corridors she didn’t know, yet Ruby had no choice but to trust him. The darkness was broken up by flashing blue, green and red sparks, and upon further inspection Ruby realised they were LEDs on high-tech locks. Remembering a conversation she’d had with Weiss, this wasn’t that unusual for a dust shop, although she couldn’t remember if Weiss had said it was normal to have locks on almost every single door.

This being a dust workshop, most of the rooms they could go into were offices, and a couple of laboratories. Even though Ruby had the nagging suspicion that her sister was behind one of the
locked doors, they couldn’t afford to break into any of the rooms. Instead, they crept to catch up with
the adults, their heartbeats thundering in their chests…

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They continued on in silence. Every time they ran into a guard, Sage would rush forwards, grabbing
them before they could react. He used his power crudely, dampening all negative emotions and
replacing them with happiness and complacency. It was difficult to use his semblance in such a blunt
way, yes, yet the next step was even trickier. He could manipulate emotions – not minds.

“We’re your friends,” Sage said. “You believe me, right?”

The guard nodded dumbly.

“We work here, just like you do. There’s nothing wrong here, is there?”

She shook her head enthusiastically.

“We’ll be on our way, then.” He smiled. “It would be silly to report us, wouldn’t it?”

“Yeah,” she agreed.

They walked past her calmly, keeping their faces pleasant and trying to make their weapons look as
harmless as possible. Qrow was buzzing with impatience, though, and sweat was trickling its way
down Sage’s back. How many guards had he charmed by now? Three? Four? And how long would
his power last…?

Sage hadn’t seen nor memorised the blueprints for the ‘Black Horse’, so he had no idea where they
were. He followed Roxo’s lead, whom was relaying information to Ironwood on her com…

Laughter.

Roxo held up her hand and they froze, pressing back against the wall.

There was no one coming up or down the corridor they were in now. No, the laughter seemed to be
coming from behind a closed door…

Roxo and Amazon glanced at each other, communicating without words. They decided upon
something and Roxo signalled with her hand – break the door down.

They approached with caution. Light was bleeding from underneath the door, stained green by the
goggles, and just then someone laughed loudly, someone that sounded like –

Tai slammed his shoulder into the door but it opened without resistance. He stumbled into the room
but quickly righted himself, flames dancing on his fists

“Yang,” he breathed.
There – in the centre of the room, a table, around which sat three people playing cards. One was Yang. One was Nora. The other, Merrow.

Merrow was masked and hooded, but his posture was relaxed, at ease. Yang and Nora were unharmed, both of them grinning, yet when they turned to face the intruders their eyes were both a pale blue.

Sage tensed as Amazon stepped in front of him. This – this was Merrow. This was the person that had hurt Scarlet, that had kidnapped his friends. A monster, a serial killer. But more than that, he was…

Unreadable.

He was alive. Sage knew he was alive, that much was plain to see, and yet his aura showed no colour. None at all, just like Yang and Nora’s. It was twisted and wrong, this invisible colour, and – Fear.

Sage knew more than anyone else that this was a person that felt no emotions – an empty husk of a human, filled with madness and bloodlust.

Only, Merrow had been sitting, playing a game. A children’s game, by the looks of it. Snap or something.

“Dad!” Yang smiled, leaping to her feet. “Come and join us! Uncle Qrow, too, you can be on Merrow’s team!”

Qrow levelled his blade, the gears clicking as it unfolded into a scythe.

“Let them go, you bastard!” he growled darkly.

Nora pouted. “Don’t be like that. We’re having fun here, see?” Her eyes betrayed her, though, screaming from behind the blue.

“Enough!” Amazon yelled, notching his bow.

“Hello, Amazon,” said Merrow.

Amazon flinched.

Merrow’s voice was soft and lyrical – unnerving.

“It’s been too long.” Merrow turned, regarding the rest of them. He frowned when he saw Sage, but quickly moved on. “I see your wife’s with us, too. No Winter, though. But then, that’s hardly surprising, is it?”

“Why did you kidnap the students?” Amazon asked.


“Don’t play games with me!”

He smiled. “I never said this was a game.”

“Stop this,” Roxo interrupted. “We have talked for long enough.”
Yang stepped in front of Merrow. She spread her arms in invitation. “Shoot me, then.”

Amazon swore.

“What’s the matter?” Yang cocked her head. “There’s just enough room for Amazon to make the shot. Not much room to do anything else, though. Unless you care more about this student’s life than you do about killing me…”

Amazon glanced at Sage but Sage had no idea what he could do…

Before anyone had the chance to blink, Tai spun, wheel-kicking Yang to the side. He rushed forwards towards a startled Merrow, yelling “Amazon!”.

As unexpected as the move had been, Amazon was quick to react. Green light bled through his tattoos and Tai was swallowed by an emerald halo.

In the space of a second, Tai grabbed Merrow by his collar and punched Merrow square in the face, his fist burning voraciously –

Sage suddenly understood what Amazon’s semblance did. Amplified, the force of Tai’s blow knocked Merrow through the back wall, shaking the room as golden sparks exploded around him.

Tai was about to say something but Nora slammed into him with her hammer, hitting him into Qrow. Roxo darted forwards but Yang leapt to her feet, yellow flames engulfing her. Roxo skidded to a halt and Yang used that hesitation to her advantage, Nora and her retreating through the hole in the wall.

They’d escaped.

“What the _fuck_, Roxo!?” Qrow yelled, shoving Tai off him. “Tai can kick his own daughter but you hesitate to subdue a student!?”

“Hey!” Amazon cried, stepping in between them. “Don’t you talk to my wife like that!”

“I’ll – ”

“All of you, stop!” Sage yelled.

Qrow snorted, twirling his scythe. “Whatever.”

Dust settled from the hole in the wall. Taking off his night-vision goggles, Sage could see that the hole opened up onto the middle of a staircase, and that Merrow had taken it downwards. Qrow followed without waiting for the others.

Amazon started. “That leads to the warehouse underneath the workshop!”

Roxo snapped her fans open. “Then let’s stay together.”

They followed Qrow down the stairway, the light fading behind them only to be replaced by a dingy, amber haze. The stairway opened up onto a vast warehouse, rows of uncovered lightbulbs dangling from the ceiling. A giant door was set into the far side of the warehouse, behind which a tunnel would most likely link it to the surface, but before them and the door stood about twenty mind-slaves, Merrow, Yang and Nora in the middle of them.

Qrow was gawking at what stood surrounding the slaves, and when Sage looked up his mouth fell open.
“Ironwood!” Qrow bellowed into his com. “Why the fuck are those fucking mechs used by everyone except us!?”

Sage was too distracted to hear the general’s reply. He unsheathed his sword, although he doubted it would be much use against the five Atlesian paladins that stood before them. Unlike the ones the White Fang had stolen, these looked to be an advanced model, spray-painted teal and even more heavily armoured. From the glowing circuits that were carved into the robots’ weapons, Sage could also see that Merrow had put the dust workshop to good use.

They huntsmen and huntress settled into formation, with Sage at the back.

“This is your last chance to leave,” called Merrow from across the room. “I don’t want to hurt my former teammates.”

“Go to hell!” Roxo spat.

Merrow shook his head sadly. “Why did it have to come to this?”

“’Cause you’re a fucking killer!” Qrow yelled.

The paladins hummed as they came to life. They moved their lumbering frames, making the ground shudder with each step.

“The thing is, though…” said Merrow, turning his back to them. He looked over his shoulder, his mask glinting in the orange light. “I never actually killed anyone.”

The paladins attacked.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, world! I'm so sorry this took ages to post! I had major writer's block and just ugh. I have the horrible feeling that I rushed this chapter, but I decided to update so you all know I'm still alive. :) Thanks so much for all of your kudos and comments! They're the best motivators, to be honest.
“Hey, Merrow!” said the girl.

Merrow looked down – it was Chairo, from his history class. A nice girl, friendly if somewhat shy.

“Hi,” he said, going back to what he was doing. He was currently standing atop a ladder in the library, scanning the shelves for a particular textbook. Why anyone thought it was practical to have shelves this high, he didn’t know.

“What are you doing?” Chairo asked pleasantly.

“I’m looking for the textbook Oobleck told us about,” he replied.

“Oh.”

Chairo craned her neck, standing on her tiptoes to try and be helpful.

“There it is!” she said, her tail bobbing up and down as she pointed. Merrow glanced down at her tail and decided she was an otter before looking to where she gestured. Yes, the book was indeed there, just out of arm’s reach.

“Thanks,” Merrow said.

The ladder wasn’t a sliding one and he didn’t trust Chairo enough to ask her to move the ladder for him, so he leaned out, pulling on the spine of the book with his finger.

“Do you want some help?” Chairo frowned.

“No, I’m fine,” he said, leaning out a bit more. The ladder wobbled a bit and he froze, but nothing happened so he continued.

“You sure?”

Merrow rolled his eyes. “Yes, I’m sure – ”

The book came free all of a sudden and Merrow lost his balance. The ladder fell and his instinct was to grab onto the bookshelf. Unfortunately, the bookshelf couldn’t hold his weight and he only succeeded in bringing down a hoard of books on top of him as he landed.

“Merrow!” Chairo gasped, rushing over to help.

He winced, rubbing his head. “Ow.”

He was dizzy, several hardbacks having hit his head –

Chairo was staring at him.

He frowned.

“Yes?”
She swallowed. “Your…” Chairo gestured to her neck.

Merrow froze, suddenly realising that his scarf had come loose during the fall. He jumped to his feet in a panic, his eyes darting around. Luckily, no one had seen him. Hastily, he wrapped his scarf around his gills again, sweat trickling down his back.

She had seen, she had seen, she had seen…

“You’re a faunus,” said Chairo. She was smiling softly at him, blushing slightly, but her smile quickly fell when she saw the terror in his eyes.

He gripped her shoulders. “You can’t tell anyone,” he said. “You can’t, you can’t…”

“It’s okay!” Chairo said quickly. “I won’t! Your secret’s safe with me.”

He let her go, breathing somewhat, but his heart was still racing. It was okay if Amazon knew, because Amazon was his teammate. Chairo, however…

Chairo took his hand, squeezing it. “It’s okay, Merrow,” she said gently. “You don’t have to be afraid.”

“You don’t understand…”

“I do,” she said, meeting his gaze unflinchingly. “Believe me, I do.”

He swallowed, shaking, because his secret was out and his world could collapse at any moment…

“No one saw.” Chairo smiled. “Please don’t panic. I promise I won’t tell a soul, but you’ll have to trust me.”

Trust.

No, he couldn’t trust.

There was one thing he could do, however…

“No,” said Merrow, squeezing her hand back. “You won’t tell anyone…”

***

“Oh my Dust.” Jaune scrambled back against the wall, his eyes wide. “This was a mistake. We’re in way over our heads.”

They stood facing the hole Ruby’s father had punched in the wall, the sounds of fighting echoing up the staircase.

“You can’t back out now, Jaune!” Ren cried. “What about Nora?”

“We’re students!” Jaune said. “What can any of us do against someone like Merrow!”

“Did you forget how we rescued Neptune’s father?” Ruby challenged, unsheathing Crescent Rose. “Ren’s right. We’ve come all this way… We have to do something.”
Jaune breathed, clenching his fist.

“Okay,” he said. “Okay.”

Ruby’s eyes narrowed. “Good. Then let’s go.”

***

Roxo charged.

She ran, leaping into the air and twisting her body. Her fans snapped and the sticks shot out, cracking into the paladin’s exoskeleton. They pushed it back, but none of them so much as dented it.

Swearing, she landed, just as the paladin swung its fist at her –

An arrow whistled through the air, burying itself in the paladin’s fist. The arrowhead flashed purple and Roxo darted out the way just as it exploded, knocking the paladin back. The fire cleared, but – the paladin was unharmed.

Merrow laughed.

“Honestly, you’re not fighting the White Fang, here,” he teased. “You’re going to have to do better than that.”

Roxo hissed angrily. She flicked her fans and a wave of sound crashed through the enemy’s ranks, making the paladins shudder and the slaves cover their ears in pain. It didn't seem to affect Merrow, however, and Yang and Nora just shook it off.

“Try not to harm the pilots or any of the other slaves,” came Ironwood’s voice, buzzing in their ears.

Qrow snorted. “Tell us that in person, why don’t you?”

“We’re running as fast we can!”

With the paladins in front of them, there was no need for the mind-slaves to do anything. Nora swung her hammer around, however, and Yang punched her fists together.

“What’s the matter?” the blonde crowed. “Aren’t you going to come and rescue us?”

Tai growled.

Qrow stepped out in front.

“Amazon,” he said, his voice low. “Do it, long enough to take out the paladins.”

Tai started. “But Yang –”

“I'll stay away from her,” Qrow hissed.

“That’s not good enough!” Tai cried. “With my fire I can –”

“Your fire won’t work!” Qrow interrupted. “Didn’t you see what happened with Amazon’s arrow?”

“But –”

“Do it,” said Roxo. “We don’t have time to argue.”
Sage didn’t have time to ask what their plan was, because Qrow was already darting in between the paladins. Sage cried out as they turned on the huntsman, but Amazon put his bow away, reaching out. His tattoos glowed and Qrow was enveloped in a green haze and –

The paladins’ power failed.

All of them died at once, trapping their pilots inside.


Qrow swung his scythe, cutting a paladin in half by its unarmoured hip joint. As it fell he leapt up, cleaving its arms off and jumping onto the next one. Yang and Nora rushed forwards as he dismembered it, dodging round the debris that fell right in their path. Nora swung her hammer but she slipped, her hammer swinging towards Yang. Yang managed to half-block her strike, but both of them went tumbling to the floor.

Qrow crouched, facing the other three paladins.

“Yang! Nora!” Merrow called. “Shadow Qrow as closely as possible.”

Qrow swore, spinning round just as the girls closed in. Tai yelled, rushing over, and Sage heard a crack! as one of the lights fell from the ceiling, and –

Amazon let his semblance go and the glow around Qrow dissipated.

Qrow jumped out of the way and Tai dived, pushing Yang and Nora clear of the falling glass. The girls got to their feet, dazed, but Tai knocked them out before Merrow could make them do anything.

The other three paladins turned back on, however.

Roxo ran to help, and Sage followed her.

“Hey!” Amazon yelled after him, to which Sage ignored.

The huntress glanced to her side. “I thought I told you to stay back.”

Sage shrugged. “It’s not like there’s anyone else here with a big-arse sword.”

She grinned.

The heat of battle had burned away all of Sage’s nerves and fears, and that familiar adrenaline was coursing through his veins. The mind-slaves were attacking now, but Tai was holding them back, fire dancing from his fingers.

Qrow roared, cutting with his scythe, but it did nothing but scratch the paladins’ armour. Sage went to help him while Roxo backed up Tai, Amazon covering all of them with his arrows. Without Qrow’s misfortune, however, the paladins more than a match for –
Merrow turned his head just as the doors behind him exploded.

***

Ruby watched as Ironwood’s soldiers charged in from the tunnel, firing at the paladins and pushing them back. More soldiers still went to the huntsmen’s aid, securing Yang and Nora.

She watched as Sage stabbed one of the paladins’ shoulder, and another one came crashing down under Ironwood’s onslaught, and she watched as Merrow decided to take his leave.

He flicked his wrist and something silver slipped out of his sleeve, glinting. Soldiers surrounded him but he settled into a stance, and then –

Sparks flew as Merrow beheaded one soldier and disembowelled another, cutting through their metal flesh like water. The blade he was fighting with was long and slender. It was curved at the end like a large, macabre fish hook, and Ruby was simultaneously repulsed and fascinated by its clinical gruesomeness, designed purely for digging into flesh and causing as much pain as possible. She was very grateful Ironwood’s soldiers were all robots, for she would never have been able to recover from seeing Merrow’s weapons being used on humans.

Ruby started as more mind-slaves appeared from another corridor, and Ren growled.

“I’m going to Nora,” he said.

“Ren, wait!” Jaune cried.

“They need our help!” Ren hissed. His eyes were a maelstrom of emotions, none of them things you could argue with.

Jaune shook his head, drawing his sword and shield. “I’m with you,” he said.

Ren grinned. “Good.”

***

Tai watched as Merrow made for the exit and ran after him. Just as Merrow reached the door Tai slashed out with his fingers and a wall of fire erupted between Merrow and the exit, blocking it off.

Merrow skidded to a halt, taken off guard. Tai punched but Merrow dodged, ducking under his fist. Tai leapt out of the way before Merrow could counterattack.

“Hello, Taiyang,” Merrow said, his tone pleasant. “I do believe this is the first time we’ve met.” He cocked his head. “Well, discounting earlier.”

“You bastard,” Tai spat.

“Oh yes, hate me all you want.” Merrow inclined his head. “After all, I could have killed your daughter.”

Tai roared, lashing out, but Merrow blocked. They exchanged blow after vicious blow, Tai’s technique as furious as Merrow’s was calculating.

“Did you know?” said Merrow. “There’s a shadow over there that’s not attached to anything.”
He darted out of the way of one of Tai’s kicks and Tai blocked a slash from his blade.

“Quit your nonsense,” Tai growled.

Merrow looked past Tai’s shoulder, and Tai could feel him grin from underneath the mask. He glanced backwards. There was nothing, and then –

Ruby, Jaune and Ren appeared out of nowhere, darting forwards.

“Ruby!” Tai screamed in horror.

She turned at the sound of his voice, but –

Merrow’s fist slammed into the side of his face. He stumbled, his vision swimming, and Merrow grabbed him by his collar, holding him up so that Tai was in the line of any shot Amazon might make.

Merrow raised his blade, levelling it.

He sighed. “Such is the role of the villain.”

***

Ruby shrieked, bursting into a shower of rose petals, and –

She crashed into Merrow just as he brought his blade down. It bit into her shoulder but she bore through the pain, slamming Merrow into the wall with all of her strength and speed.

Merrow cried out in agony, pushing her off him. He raised his blade –

And stopped.

A second arrow thudded into his chest and he dropped his weapon, looking down. The arrowhead flashed purple, the light glinting off his blood-flecked mask, and –

Merrow exploded in a violet flame, the dust so powerful that he had no time to scream.
Time seemed to slow down.

Merrow’s mask and weapon fell to the floor with a dull clang. Around the room, the people he’d enslaved were suddenly free. They stumbled around, helpless. Someone screamed, and someone else started crying.

The whole thing was over as suddenly as it had begun.

Chapter End Notes

We have reached the end of this arc! Yay~! So what did you all think of the ending?
Anchor

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sage didn’t notice the first Arrow hit Merrow.

Sage carved his blade through the last paladin’s chest and it collapsed, the pilot ejecting as it fell so that he went sprawling across the floor. He heard Taiyang cry out and spun, but the pilot was in front of him and Sage turned, readying himself, but –

The pilot jerked, crying out in pain.

What was wrong, what was happening…

Something cut the air.

Sage’s eyes widened. Merrow was poised over Ruby (when did she get here!?), only – two arrows had their heads buried in Merrow’s chest. Flashing, flashing –

The fire was violet, but Sage saw an explosion of every colour. Every single one, the entirety of the human spectrum, and –

Merrow was dead.

Nothing left; nothing but ash –

Shock.

Anger, pain, relief.

Fear, guilt.

Confusion, loss…
He clutched his head because everyone in the room, everyone’s emotions –

“Sage,” said Amazon, placing a worried hand on his shoulder.

No.

“Sage!”

No, not your guilt, not your hatred your –

Breathe.

“Think of Sun,” said Scarlet. “Think of him meaning well but saying something stupid.”

Breathe.

“Think of Neptune,” said Scarlet. “He’s reliable; you can count on him.”

Breathe.

“Think of me,” said Scarlet. He held Sage’s gaze, the whirlwind of colours around him subsiding. Sage’s panic, fading.

Scarlet smiled softly. “I know I’m nothing special, but you can think of me anyway. All of us, we’re your teammates. When it’s all too much, we’ll…” He paused. “We’ll be your anchor.”

His anchor.

“Sage?” Amazon was saying, and Sage could hear him again.

Sage shook his head, getting to his feet. “I’m okay,” he said. The colours were muted, and his head wasn’t aching so much…

“What happened?” Amazon asked, his brow creased.


Amazon removed his hand at this, and Sage knew exactly why the huntsman thought he was to blame.
“Where did Ruby and the others come from?” Sage asked, only just noticing Jaune and Ren.

“I don’t know,” he replied.

Sage looked around. The former slaves were completely at a loss, and the soldiers’ presence wasn’t helping. Across the room:

“Ruby!” Taiyang cried. He rushed over to crush his daughter in a bear-hug. Ruby slumped against the far wall. “Oh my dust, Ruby, you could have died! What were you thinking!?”

“Ow ow ow!” Ruby yelped.

Tai let go. “Show me.”

Gingerly, she took her hand away, exposing the cut that ran from her shoulder to her collarbone – Sage could make it out, even from this distance.

Tai’s eyes widened.

“Help!” he yelled wildly. “We need a medic over here! My daughter…” His voice failed.

“I’m here!” Amazon cried, standing up. He signalled to a soldier and they rushed over, Amazon determinedly avoiding looking at Merrrow’s mask.

On the other side of the warehouse, Ironwood was yelling at Ren and Jaune.

“YOU IDIOTS!” he roared. “Do you have any idea the hell you could have caused? You could have jeopardised the entire mission!”

Ren ignored him, kneeling beside Nora.

“Nora?” he asked, his voice anxious. “Nora? Can you hear me?”

“She’s unconscious, kid,” Qrow said. “Probably for the best; we have no idea what’ll happen when she wakes up.”

Ren pulled Nora into his lap, cradling her head. He whispered something to her, too low for anyone to hear.

“Glyda will be furious!” Ironwood continued, Jaune now bearing the full brunt of his wrath. “Ozpin, too. You could be expelled!”

“I-I…” Jaune stammered.

“Give it a rest, James,” Qrow interrupted, folding away his scythe. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, here. I did much worse when I was a student, and I never got expelled.” He sat down heavily next to Yang, taking a long swig from his hipflask. “You should be glad this is all over.”

Ironwood clenched his fist, staring at his feet. “Yeah…”

Roxo was comforting the men and women that had been enslaved by Merrow, trying her best to help. One woman was still crying hysterically, and another man rocked back and forth, clutching his head. Sage sympathised with them both.

The huntress stood up, shaking her head. “Only two of them appear to have been seriously injured by the mind-control,” she said.
Ironwood sighed. “I suppose it could have been worse.” He turned around. “Where’s Mac Lir?”

Roxo frowned. “Don’t ask me.”

“I wasn’t,” he replied, going back to speaking in his com.

Roxo blinked.

Jaune came over to stand by Sage.

“Oh…” the blond started.

Sage swallowed. “Yeah.”

Everything had happened too quickly to process. Ruby, Jaune and Ren had appeared out of nowhere, Taiyang had been about to be killed, Ruby had saved him, then –

Amazon killed Merrow.

Sage looked over to where Amazon was treating Ruby. The huntsman was wearing a brave face, but Sage could see the flood of emotions he was barely holding back: primal bloodlust overwhelmed by a crushing guilt, all conflicting with a logic that was justifying what he’d done. Judging from Roxo’s gaze, she knew what her husband was going through, too.

Killing Merrow had been unavoidable – there was no questioning that fact. Even then… No matter how sick or twisted the person was, a life was still a life, and taking one left scars deep on your soul.

“Will be alright?” asked Jaune.

Honestly? Sage didn’t know how to reply.

Amazon finished bandaging Ruby and the three of them came over, Tai and Ruby going straight to Yang’s side. Roxo took Amazon to the side to speak with him quietly, and Sage glanced as one of the soldiers picked up Merrow’s mask and weapon, dumping them into a clear plastic bag.

“Yang?” Ruby cried. “Yang? It’s me, Ruby!”

As Sage and Jaune came over, Ren grabbed him by the shoulder.

“Sage, please!” he said. “Can’t you do anything?”

“I…” He hesitated. “They’re not under Merrow’s control anymore. I can’t…”

Yang’s eyes opened.

They all started.

Yang swallowed dryly, yet said nothing.

“Nora,” Ren whispered, for Nora had woken to.

The redhead raised her hand weakly, opening her mouth. Her voice didn’t work, though, and all she could do was to poke Ren feebly in the face.
“What –”

Ironwood cut them off. “Mac Lir’s outside.”

***

Doctor Mac Lir shone a light in Yang’s pupils. He took her pulse, then checked her temperature as well.

“What’s wrong with my daughter?” Taiyang asked anxiously.

Mac Lir listened to her heartbeat for a couple of moments, then took the stethoscope out of his ears. He hesitated, scratching his head.

“The four of them were the most heavily affected by Merrow,” the doctor explained, gesturing to Yang, Nora and two of the other victims. “Merrow’s ability… It puts the brain under stress, and if used too forcefully – that is, if the victim fights back…”

Sage inhaled sharply.

Ruby paled. “You’re saying they’re brain damaged?”

He winced.

“Technically, yes.” Mac Lir nodded. “You can rest assured, though. If we act quickly, I can save them.”

“You’re going to perform brain surgery on them!?” Ren cried.

Qrow hissed.

Mac Lir frowned. “In this modern age of dust, there’s no need,” he replied. “Have no fear, I’m confident I can heal the physical damage. The most difficult stage will come afterwards, though.”

“Therapy,” Sage guessed.

The doctor nodded. “That’s right.”

Tai shook his head, wringing his hands. “How can you be sure you can save them?” he asked.

Mac Lir pushed his glasses up his nose. Amazon and Roxo straightened, and Ironwood glanced over.

“I’ve studied Merrow’s semblance more than anyone else,” said Mac Lir. “It took me five years, but… I developed a technique with medicinal dust specifically with this in mind.”

Ruby blinked. “But… why?”

Roxo took a step forwards. “You don’t need to –”

“No, it’s okay,” Mac Lir interrupted.

He sighed, exhaling deeply. Sage frowned at the tension blooming in Mac Lir.

“You see,” the doctor said, “Merrow’s my twin.”
“What the hell!?” Taiyang cried.

“Why the fuck – ” Qrow started.

“We know,” Ironwood interrupted, stepping in.

“Oh you do?” Qrow leered. “You think you could’ve told us this!?”

“It wasn’t relevant.” Ironwood shrugged. “Ozpin’s known about Mac Lir since he started working at Beacon.”

“I haven’t spoken to my brother in nineteen years,” Mac Lir filled in. “I… We have – had – a complicated relationship.”

“Besides, we knew you’d react like this,” Roxo added. “Surely we don’t need to explain to you what it’s like having siblings we’re ashamed of.”

Qrow snarled.

“I don’t care about any of that right now,” Tai interrupted. “If what you said is true, we need to get these four back to Beacon straight away.”

Mac Lir nodded, relieved. “Thank you.”

There was already an ambulance waiting, its lights flashing blue amongst the red of police vans.

Taiyang helped Yang and Ruby into it, and Ren carried Nora in his arms. Roxo and Mac Lir saw to the other two victims, and the ambulance was soon on its way. Sage watched it go and Amazon watched it with him.

Qrow yawned.

Chapter End Notes

So how was it? Originally, I'd planned to reveal the *thing* in a different way, but then I changed the plot and... well... Yeah. *winc* I hope it's not too out of place? Anyway, I have no idea how long the next arc will be, but it should be lighter and have more comic relief. You know, because Jaune kind of messed up in a very serious way... ;)}
The ambulance shook on its wheels as it sped round corners, racing towards Beacon. Mac Lir attended to the victims, making sure the turbulence didn’t affect them.

Ren eyed him suspiciously. “Can you control minds, as well?” he asked guardedly.

Mac Lir shook his head. “If I could, I’d never have to treat students for doing the same stupid things twice.”

The doctor hadn’t said anyone’s name, but Ren got the feeling he meant Sun all the same.

“Then what is your semblance?”

He paused. “I don’t have one.”

Ruby frowned. “What? That’s ridiculous! How can you not have a semblance?”

“In the case of twins, they usually share the same semblance,” Mac Lir explained, scratching his head. “However, the alternative is that one twin will end up with an unusually powerful semblance whilst the other has nothing.”

“So Merrow stole your semblance when you were born?” she asked.

The doctor shrugged. “I guess you can look at it like that.”

Roxo shook her head. “None of that matters now,” the huntress said, her expression brooding.

Taiyang held Yang’s hand tightly. “How long do they have?” he asked.

Mac Lir pushed his glasses up his nose. “With the equipment I have in the ambulance I was able to stabilise them for now. They have maybe five, ten minutes before the damage becomes irreversible?”

Ren clenched his fist. “How far away are we from Beacon?”

“A couple of minutes now,” the driver called.

They all breathed a sigh of relief.

“Who are the other two victims?” Ruby spoke up.

Roxo shrugged. “I don’t know. Probably some of the first people he enslaved when he came to Vale.”

Mac Lir tensed, looking away. He locked his jaw. “I…” He swallowed. “I’m sorry,” he said. “If only I’d been able to do something about my brother… If I’d known what he was, or if I’d had the power to fight him…”

Taiyang shook his head. “If you can save my daughter’s life, then you’ve done enough.” He smiled sadly. “I’ll be in your debt.”
Mac Lir’s eyes narrowed, and he nodded.

When they arrived at Beacon people were already there, waiting to rush the victims to the infirmary. Ozpin, Goodwitch and several of the other staff were all on hand, as well as several of the students whom knew what was going on. Almost immediately, the victims were transferred onto stretchers.

“What happened to Merrow?” Ozpin asked warily.

“Amazon killed him,” Roxo replied.

Ozpin frowned, about to say something else, but Glynda interrupted:

“Ruby Rose and Lie Ren!” she hissed. “Explain yourselves, now! And where is Jaune Arc?”

“Jaune’s with coming back with the others,” Roxo cut in.

“You three are in – ”

Ozpin placed his hand on Goodwitch’s shoulder. “Now is not the time, Glynda.”

Glynda only just realised that there was more red on Ruby than just her cloak, and her eyes widened. She shook her head and shepherded the girl onto a stretcher as well, waving her riding crop. All five stretchers rose into the air and Glynda directed them towards the infirmary, people rushing beside them.

“Are they alright?” Pyrrha asked, her eyes wide.

“They’ll be fine if we hurry,” Mac Lir replied.

Blake and Weiss hovered over Yang and Ruby, with Weiss loudly proclaiming how much of an idiot Ruby was for going off on her own, her outcries punctuated with sobs. Just then, Scarlet came running, quickly followed by Sun and Neptune. The redhead froze when he saw the procession.

He swallowed. “Are they…”

“They’re alive,” said Ruby.

Sun’s eyes widened. “Oh my dust, Ruby, what happened to you!?”

“She, Ren and Jaune ran off without telling us,” Pyrrha said, her voice uncharacteristically cold. Ruby flinched, and Ren looked away.

“Are you crazy!?” Neptune cried, he and Sun rushing over to help.

***

Scarlet paused, afraid. He couldn’t think, couldn’t consider…

“Where’s Sage?” he asked, his voice hoarse.

“They’re – ”

“Pyrrha!” called a voice.

They turned to look at where Jaune was waving from across the courtyard, accompanied by the rest of the rescue team. He was sweating and out of breath, panting heavily, and –
Pyrrha ignored him. She didn’t even turn her head.

Jaune frowned and said something else, running over, but –

There: Sage.

He was alive.

Sage smiled.

Scarlet bit his fist to keep himself from sobbing with relief. Scarlet felt like running to him, felt like crying, but –

He couldn’t. Now was not the time, not whilst Yang and Nora were still in danger.

***

Sage struggled to get to sleep. His mind and body were exhausted yet every time he closed his eyes he heard that arrow, thudding… No, there was no need to think of that now.

They’d waited outside the infirmary for several hours, anxiety creeping up on them with each heartbeat yet, just as the sun started to dawn, Mac Lir announced that the treatment had been successful. (Sage supposed they had the power of pathetic fallacy to thank for that.)

Everyone had been excused from classes and Sage was glad of the chance to sleep through the day, or at least to try to. Sun and Neptune had left him to rest yet Scarlet lay across the room, watching him. Sage could see all manner of things in the redhead’s aura. Most of them were positive, though, so he relaxed.

“Did you see it?” Scarlet asked suddenly, his voice quiet. “When Merrow died, did you see it?”

Swallowing, Sage nodded.

Scarlet rolled over, covering his eyes with his forearm.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

Sage frowned. “What for?”

“For worrying about you.”

Oh.

Sage smiled softly. “It’s fine,” he said. “I like the colour.”

His exhaustion was catching up with him now, and his eyes fluttered closed, so sleepy…

“What colour is it?”

Just before he drifted off, Sage mumbled:

“Scarlet.”
“Oh, shit!”

His eyes shot open and he jumped out of bed, reaching for his weapon –

Sage slipped, falling backwards into Sun.

“Careful!” the faunus cried, steadying them both. Sage was breathing heavily, alert. His eyes darted about, but there was no one else in the room apart from Scarlet. What had he slipped on?

An… egg.

“What…?”

“I was going to bring you dinner in bed, but I tripped coming through the window,” Sun explained sheepishly.

Sage frowned. “It’s the thought that counts…”

“I have more food,” Neptune reassured, walking through the door. “I had a feeling something like this would happen.”

Sun snorted. “Rude.”

Sage laughed. “Thanks, you two.”

Neptune smiled.

“By the way,” Sun added, “my family heard what happened, so they’re coming to – ”

Sun’s brothers slammed the door open, eyes wide.

The sound woke up Scarlet, whom groaned. Upon seeing him, the twins attacked. They tackled him to the bed frantically, holding him down.

“ARE YOU DEAD, SCARLET!?” Mara cried tearfully.

“ARE YOU A ZOMBIE, SCARLET!?” Cuja asked, shoving his face up close so that they were eye to eye.

Scarlet was taken aback, startled.

“Uh…” he stammered. “No?”

The twins tackled him again, this time hugging him.

“We’re so glad you’re not dead!”

The rest of Sun’s family arrived, hassled.

“Mara! Cuja!” Huang bellowed. “Get off him at once!”
“But Muuum!” The twins pouted.

Yaya, whom was just about old enough to understand the situation, glanced apologetically at Scarlet.

“Okay,” said Neptune, picking up Mara and Cuja by their collars. “That’s enough bothering Scarlet for today.”

The twins made eye contact, then grinned, a new target acquired. Before he knew what was happening, Neptune was no longer wearing his goggles. The twins were hanging from Sun’s bunk, playing with the straps so that Neptune’s goggles could fit over both their heads at the same time. They were dangling just in front of Sage so he reached up and bopped them. They swayed back and forth like a seesaw, then giggled.

“Again!”

Sage did so, marvelling at how light and bouncy the children were.

Sun laughed.

“Don’t encourage them!” Neptune protested.

Sun’s parents took in the situation and just stood there, looking utterly confused.

Eventually, Scarlet spoke:

“Why is there food on the floor?”

Sun rolled his eyes. “I’ll clean it up.”

The redhead raised an eyebrow. “What… No, never mind. I don’t want to know.”

He swung his legs round to sit up, yawning.

“We got food for you all,” Jin said, holding up a box of takeaway. “It’s Menagerian.”

“I also have food,” said Neptune. “It’s whatever they had in the canteen.”

Scarlet stretched. “Wonderful.”

Sun cleared up the mess and they all sat down to eat. Mara and Cuja seemed to be using Sage’s shoulders as their castle, Neptune’s goggles their flag. He didn’t mind; this way he could almost forget about what had happened. Scarlet… Scarlet looked as if he’d finally managed to get some sleep, which was good. His face was still a little gaunt, but he was eating heartily.

“How are you feeling, Scarlet?” Huang asked as gently as she could.

“I’m…” He hesitated, then sighed. “I’m fine.”

Huang’s brow creased in concern, and Sage felt his chest tighten.

There came a knock on the door.

Sun frowned. “Who is it?”

“It’s Neptune’s parents,” called Rhea. “We just wanted to see how things were.”

Neptune scratched the back of his head. “Come in?”
Rhea opened the door and then she and Saturn stopped, blinking at the circle of people eating food on the floor.

“Um…”

“Scarlet’s not dead!” Mara explained.

“Scarlet’s not a zombie! He won’t eat our brains!” Cuja exclaimed.

“Well not Sun,” Mara said. “He doesn’t have a brain to eat.”

“Hey!” their brother cried.

A pause.

Saturn swallowed. “That’s… nice?”

Quiet unexpectedly, Scarlet began to laugh.

He clutched his sides, tears streaming down his face until he eventually had to wipe his eyes, smiling. The room relaxed.

“Want to sit down?” Scarlet asked Neptune’s parents.

Rhea smiled. “Sure!”

***

“Pyrrha!” Jaune cried, running after his girlfriend. “Pyrrha, wait!”

She turned angrily, a hand on her hip. “What, Jaune?”

He took a moment to catch his breath, panting. She hadn’t spoken a word to him since he’d got back, and he could tell she was furious just by the way she walked.

“Why… why are you avoiding me?” he cried. “Did I do something wrong?”

She stared at him incredulously.

“You… You…!”

Pyrrha yelled in frustration, kicking a stone. It hit the wall loudly, cracking the brick.

“You and Ren ran off without me!” she cried.

“You and Ren ran off without me!” she cried.

“Too dangerous!” he protested. “I didn’t want to – ”

“Too dangerous?” Pyrrha repeated. “Too dangerous! I’m stronger than the rest of you combined, and you know it! I don’t know if you can’t accept that or whether you just don’t trust me, but…” She shook her head, pacing irritably. “I just…”

Jaune gulped dryly, his heart sinking as he realised just how fantastically he’d fucked up. He’d never meant for this to happen, for Pyrrha to interpret it like this. He’d wanted to keep her safe, but also… He’d wanted to prove that he could look after his teammates, that he was worthy of being their leader…
“I’m sorry,” he said.

Pyrrha looked at him with conflicting eyes. “I…” She clenched her fist, looking away. “I need some time.”

His world stopped.

“Are… are you breaking up with me?” Jaune whispered, his voice broken.

“I don’t know,” said Pyrrha. “Just… don’t speak to me for a while.”

She walked away, and Jaune didn’t go after her.

He was, after all, a coward.

Chapter End Notes

I probably should have uploaded this as two separate chapters but oh well. I hope you enjoyed it! Comments and kudos are greatly appreciated. :)

“How is she?” Blake asked.

“She’s…” Ruby sighed. “She’s okay. Yang’s Yang, after all.”

Weiss’ brow creased. “Even so, after what she went through…”

“Don’t mention it,” Ruby warned. “Nothing’s happened yet, but… Just don’t mention it.”

Ruby opened the door and they went into the room. Yang was sitting upright, her hair tied back into a ponytail. She was holding one arm even though it wasn’t broken, rubbing circles into it, and her hand was twitching ever so slightly. Her eyes were far away, but she looked up when she saw them, starting.

“Blake! Weiss!” Yang cried, then clapped a hand to her mouth, glancing next to her.

Slumped over in a chair by the bed, Taiyang was fast asleep, snoring loudly.

Ruby frowned. “How long has he been there?”

“Since I woke up,” Yang replied fondly.

They sat down on the bed beside her.

“How are you?” Weiss asked gently.

“Bored as hell,” Yang grumbled. “I can’t do anything on my own because of… what happened to me.”

Silence.

Ruby swallowed.

Blake smiled. “Well, we’re glad you’re okay.”

Yang glared at them. “Why wouldn’t I be? I was only under Merrow’s control for a day.”

Weiss started. “Yang…”

“What?” she snapped. “Did Ruby tell you not to mention it?”

Ruby looked down.

“You’ve been through a lot, and – ”

“I’m fine!” Yang interrupted exasperatedly. “I am fine. The only thing that’s bugging me is that we’ve lost time to train for the Vytal festival!”

Weiss stood up. “How can you even think about participating after everything that’s happened!?”

Yang grit her teeth, her eyes flashing red. “I am not going to let a little serial killer get in the way of
my team’s victory!”

Yang’s hand was shaking visibly now yet she clenched her fist, hiding it under the blanket.

Ruby closed her eyes. “Yang…”

“We’ll do it,” Blake said suddenly, cutting everyone else off.

Yang looked at her, startled.

“We’ll win the Vytal tournament,” Blake continued. “Right, girls?”

The faunus met their eyes and Weiss sighed.

“Yes,” the heiress said. She smiled. “I suppose we will.”

They looked at Ruby. She hesitated, then grinned.

“Of course we will!” She jumped to her feet. “We’re team RWBY, after all.”

Just as they left, Taiyang jerked awake, startled.


Yang shook her head, breathing deeply. “Ruby, Weiss and Blake came to visit.”

“Oh.” He scratched his head. “Did they bring anything?”

Yang started to shake her head before she noticed the flowers Blake had left behind – roses. She hadn’t seen Blake carry them in.

“Yes.” Yang cocked her head. “They did.”

***

On the way out, they bumped into Ren and Pyrrha on their way to see Nora, Ren burdened with a basket full of food.

“How’s Yang?” Ren asked.

“Good,” said Blake. “How’s Nora?”

“Hungry,” said Ren, motioning to the massive stack of pancakes he was carrying. “She’s annoyed that the doctors won’t let her out yet.”

Ruby laughed. “Yang’s the same.”

A pause.

Pyrrha shook her head. “They’ll be alright,” she said softly. “And… We’ll be here for them when they’re not alright.”

The girls nodded in agreement.

“Where’s Jaune, by the way?” Ruby asked. “I thought he’d be with you.”

“I don’t know, and I don’t want to,” Pyrrha replied curtly.
Weiss blinked. “What… happened?”

Blake snorted. “Jaune did run off without her, remember?”

“Oh yeah,” Weiss hissed, glaring at Ruby.

Ruby shrank backwards, laughing nervously.

“How come you’re not angry at Ren, though?” Blake pointed out.

Pyrrha smiled coldly. “Oh, I’m angry with him alright.”

Ren started to sweat.

“Just not as angry as I am with that blond idiot.”

Weiss snorted. “I totally understand how you feel.”

“Oh…” Ruby stammered. “I hope things work out?”

Pyrrha’s eyes narrowed. “We’ll see.”

She and Ren went into Nora’s room, leaving the girls alone.

Blake raised her eyebrow. “I hope things work out?” she repeated.

“What?” Ruby cried. “What else was I supposed to say?”

Weiss started walking, tossing her hair. “I don’t know. ‘Sorry’, maybe?”

“But I already said I’m sorry like a million times!” Ruby cried, chasing after her.

Weiss snorted.

Blake rolled her eyes then shrugged, following after her teammates.

Chapter End Notes

It’s a short chapter this week because I got distracted writing something else, but didn't want to leave you with nothing. Next chapter we should see some more of Sage and Scarlet!
With each hit the punchbag rocked on its hinges, groaning. Again and again Yang struck, panting heavily with sweat coursing down her body. She’d been training for hours already yet she wouldn’t take a break – she couldn’t. Yang couldn’t afford to fall behind. She had to get stronger, to overcome anything that stood in her way…

Yang roared, punching the bag with all her might. Her fist broke the fabric and the bag was knocked off its hinges, crashing into the floor to lie as a deflated husk. Sighing, she picked it up and tossed it onto the others, going over to the other side of the gym to get another bag.

Blake was there, leaning against a wall.

Yang started, for she hadn’t heard the faunus come in.

Blake raised her eyebrow. “Are you trying to punch your way through all of the gym’s equipment?”

Yang snorted. “How long have you been watching me?”

Blake didn’t reply, standing up. “Have you eaten yet?”

Yang turned away. “I’ll eat later.”

She picked up another punchbag, slinging it over her shoulder. Her teammate followed her.

“When did you last eat?”

Yang ignored her, hanging the punchbag up. She wiped her brow.

Blake gripped her shoulder. “Yang.”

A pause. “Yesterday.”

Blake shook her head. “You can’t do this to yourself.”

“Do what?” Yang met her gaze.

“Punish yourself for not being strong enough.”

Silence.

She clenched her fist. “I have to get stronger.”

“You are strong,” said Blake. “There was nothing you could have done.”

“I know that!” Yang hissed. She looked down. “I know that…”

Blake’s brow creased with concern. “I’m having lunch with my family today,” she said. “Come with me.”

Yang breathed in deeply. She closed her eyes, stilling her mind.
“Only… only if you win.”

The faunus frowned. “Win what?”

Yang lunged, striking out. Blake ducked, darting out the way.

“What the hell, Yang?!”

She grinned. “What, you don’t think I’m well enough to spar with you?”

Blake was about to protest, but just… sighed.

“Whatever,” she grumbled.

Yang advanced. Her right fist hooked out but Blake blocked, countering. Yang dodged, twisting round and jabbing at Blake’s unprotected side. Blake absorbed the hit, grunting, and rushed in, kneeing Yang in the stomach. She coughed, backing out, and Blake smirked.

“I thought you were going to show me how well you were,” she teased.

Yang growled.

Rushing forwards, she punched twice as a distraction and lashed out with a roundhouse. Blake avoided it and retaliated with a hook-kick, which Yang caught. Blake cried out as Yang swept her but she grabbed on and – both of them were on the floor.

Blake was the first to recover, straddling Yang in full mount and locking her head in a strangle. One, two, three seconds – and Yang tapped out.

Blake let go, both of them breathing heavily.

“I think I won,” she said.

Yang laughed, the vibrations rolling through the both of them. Blake smiled.

“What time are you having lunch?” the blonde asked.

“One,” Blake replied.

They glanced at the clock.

“I’d better have a shower, then,” Yang said.

***

“Sage!” Jaune called, running up to them.

Sage and Scarlet turned around, frowning. They’d taken the long way round to the canteen, so there weren’t that many people about. Trees lined the street, blooming white flowers with their petals blanketing the pavements.

Sage frowned. “What’s up?”

Jaune hesitated, blushing. “Um… so…” He scratched the back of his neck. “Well, Pyrrha’s kind of mad at me…”

Scarlet snorted. “No shit.”
Sage nudged him. He shut up.

“I’m sure you two will work it out.” Sage smiled.

“But… could you tell me what she’s feeling, or something?” Jaune frowned. “I just don’t know what to do…”

Sage blinked. “Uh…”

“No,” said Scarlet, shaking his head. “We are not going there. Do not ask Sage for love advice; it does not work!”

Sage pulled a face. “Y-Yeah…”

“But –”

“Don’t do it. Just don’t do it, it's not worth the pain.”

Jaune paled. “Then what am I going to do!”

Scarlet shrugged. “I don’t know. Do a Jaune thing. That’s what she’s into, anyway.”

He raised his eyebrow. “What’s a ‘Jaune thing’?”

“Something stupid.”

“Scarlet!” Sage scolded.

“Sorry.”

“I think what’s he’s trying to say is just be yourself, and be honest with her,” said Sage.

“Right.” Jaune nodded. “I think I can do that.”

“Good luck!” Scarlet waved.

“Thanks!”

Jaune ran off grinning.

Scarlet sighed. “This is not going to go well…”

Sage laughed. “What advice would you have given him?”

He shrugged. “Same as you, probably. Just say the truth.”

“I wonder what that would sound like?” Sage commented, gazing up at the sky.

Scarlet rolled his eyes. “Maybe something like ‘I'm sorry for messing up’?”

“That’s not very romantic, Scar.”

“You want romantic?” Scarlet challenged. “How about: ‘You mean more to me than anyone else in this godforsaken world. I know I fucked up, but please, just give me a chance. Without you… my life has no colour in it.’”

Sage frowned. “Better…”
Scarlet hesitated. “You saved me. I’m an idiot, but… you looked past that. You saw that I needed help and you gave it freely. I’m so sorry for all of my mistakes, for everything I’ve done to you. I’ll do anything at all to earn your forgiveness, because I…” Scarlet paused. “I love you.”

Silence.

Sage swallowed.

Scarlet grinned. “Yeah, that’s what Jaune should say to Pyrrha!”

Sage blinked, staring at him. “I guess…”

Chapter End Notes

So I kind of forgot to update last weekend... Sorry! (I got distracted writing something else.) So what did you think of this chapter? Comments and kudos remind me to update! xD
Pyrrha turned over in her sleep. She frowned – it wasn’t often she heard guitar music in her dreams. Actually, she never heard any music… No, wait. She was awake, and someone was playing the guitar right next to her.

Her heart clenched and she growled: “Jaune.”

“Good morning, Pyrrha!” Jaune sang, still playing.

She sat up, glaring at him through her bedhead.

“What are you doing?” she hissed.

“I am serenading you until you listen to me,” he said.

“I am listening to you,” Pyrrha said. “It’s terrible.”

That was a lie. Jaune’s playing was excellent verging on virtuosic, and his voice wasn’t half-bad. She was not in the mood to admit that, though. Jaune flinched, but Pyrrha stood her ground. Unfortunately, so did he.

Pyrrha got up. “Are you going to follow me into the bathroom?” she asked.

He paused. “I…”

She went in, closing the door in his face. Jaune continued to play, picking up the pace. Pyrrha ran her hands through her hair, resisting the urge to scream. When she came out of the bathroom he was still there, and Ren and Nora were both listening to him.

“You’re actually really good at that,” Nora said, surprised.

“Of course I am!” Jaune smiled. “I’ve been playing since I was little.”

Pyrrha walked past him, sitting down next to her teammates.

“Nora, are you feeling any better today?”

Nora nodded. “I’ve… been through worse.”

Pyrrha’s brow creased, but Ren nodded gently at her – he knew Nora the best, after all.

“We’d better get going,” said Ren. “We’ll be late for class otherwise.”

The stood up, but Jaune didn’t put his guitar away.

“Seriously?” Pyrrha raised his eyebrow.

“I won’t stop until you listen to me.”

Pyrrha snorted. “Are you sure you can play for that long?”
An open chord.

Jaune grinned. “Why don’t you find out?”

***

“What the actual fuck?” Scarlet cried.

“He’s playing his guitar until Pyrrha gets back together with him,” said Nora.

Scarlet blinked. “Dude, when I said do a Jaune thing, I didn’t actually mean do a Jaune thing.”

Pyrrha raised her eyebrow. “So Scarlet, you had something to do with this?”

“No, it was all Sage.”

Pyrrha looked at Sage. Sage scratched his head uncomfortably, looking away.

“I think it’s sweet,” said Ruby.

“That’s because you’re a dolt,” said Weiss.

Neptune frowned. “I guess it’s kind of romantic? Ish?”

“I’m super romantic,” said Jaune. Then, to Pyrrha: “And super sorry.”

Pyrrha shook her head.

Sun and Scarlet groaned.

The door opened and Yang and Blake entered the classroom, laughing. There was only two minutes until the class was due to start, yet Professor Oobleck was not in sight. They paused, taking in Jaune and everyone else looking at Jaune.

Blake pulled a face. “Dare I ask why you’re playing a guitar?”

“I am serenading Pyrrha until she listens to me,” Jaune sang.

“Right.” The faunus sat down. “Good luck with that.”

“Thank you very much~”

“You know, food is a much better way to a girl’s heart.” Yang smirked at Blake.

“Don’t…” Blake warned.

“Even your Mum agreed that –”

Blake clapped her hand over Yang’s mouth before she could finish, and the pair of them devolved into some sort of playfight, with Yang the one playing and Blake the one fighting.

“Um…” said Sage.

“They’ve been like that ever since yesterday,” said Weiss. “Something about Yang getting along with Blake’s parents.”

Sun frowned. “What, even her father?”
“Yeah, Ghira loves me,” said Yang.

Sun pouted. “He doesn’t even like me.”

“’Cause you’re a guy, and guys suck.”

Scarlet snorted. “Suck dick, more like.”

Jaune’s fingers fumbled as he snickered, and Nora laughed. Ruby smiled, but… It was strange. Everything was back to normal, yet she still felt uneasy. It was the shock of what had happened, she knew. Ruby rubbed her shoulder. She wondered, did Sage feel the same? Or Yang, or Nora? Perhaps they disguised it with laughter, but for whatever reason, Ruby just couldn’t do the same.

Weiss glanced at Ruby anxiously, but said nothing.

Just then, Professor Oobleck arrived, a stack of papers under his arm and a cup of coffee in his hand.

“Quiet down, class, quiet down!” he called, rushing towards the front.

Everyone fell silent apart from Jaune, whom continued to strum a few hesitant chords. Oobleck looked at him.

“Mr Arc?”

“Yes?”

Oobleck sighed. “Where do I even begin?”

***

Pyrrha was waiting for him outside his detention.

She smirked. “It seems you couldn’t play for very long, after all.”

Jaune dragged his guitar along the floor, sighing. “Yeah yeah, you don’t have to rub it in.”

“Honestly, what were you expecting? That teachers would just let you interrupt their classes?”

Jaune didn’t bother replying. Pyrrha walked after him.

“So what did you want to say?”

He stopped. “What?”

“What did you want to say to me?” Pyrrha asked. “You might as well say it now.”

“I…” He stammered. “I love you.”

Silence.

Pyrrha swallowed, blushing. “Is that all?”

“Yes,” said Jaune. “No, I mean… I’m sorry. I’m an idiot, a coward. I wasn’t thinking, and… I was scared that what happened to Nora might happen to you.” He gulped. “I don’t know what I would have done in that situation. I know it’s stupid, but I…”

He shut up when he saw Pyrrha wipe the tears from her eyes.
“Did I say something wrong?”

She shook her head, smiling. “No, you didn’t.”

Jaune frowned. “Then… what?”

“Nothing.” Pyrrha grinned. “Come on, it’s getting late.”

She walked past him, a spring in her step. Jaune ran after her.

“Does this mean we’re back together?”

“Of course.” Pyrrha took his arm. “You’re an idiot, Jaune, but your my idiot.”

Chapter End Notes

I promise I know what's happening...
I Don't Know

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sage found Amazon in the greenhouse. The huntsman was building something, wood shavings scattered around the floor where he worked. He was sawing long sticks of wood into smaller lengths, separating them.

“Hey, Sage,” Amazon said without turning around.

He swallowed. “Hi.”

“I’m just working on some new trellises.”

“Right.”

Silence.

Sweat coursed down Amazon’s body, tracing his tattoos. “Are you going to comment on my colours?”

Sage blinked. “What?”

“My emotions.” Amazon put down the saw, turning around and wiping his brow.

Sage hesitated. “You… seem to have them under control, actually.”

It was true. Amazon’s aura was contained, mellow, with no burning colours.

“I’m a huntsman,” Amazon said. “Ever since I joined Beacon, my life has been nothing but difficult decisions, not all of them right.”

“You…”

“I killed my own teammate,” he said, looking Sage in the eye. “That’s not something I can ever undo.”

There it was – that shadow of blue, of blossoming guilt.

“I can – “

“No.” Amazon shook his head. “Thank you, but… I need to bear this burden myself.”

Sage frowned.

The huntsman smiled wryly. “So what else is on your mind?”

Sage started. “How did you know?”

“Your pauldron’s on the wrong shoulder,” Amazon said.

Sage hurriedly fixed it. He hadn’t even noticed, and of course none of his teammates had told him.

“Um…” He swallowed, and a certain conversation kept playing in his mind. “What does… love feel
like?”

Amazon blinked. “It depends, I guess.” He stretched. “Sometimes it’s like discovering joy for the first time. Sometimes it starts as a friendship that grows into something more, so gradually you don’t even realise, and other times it’s like getting hit by a bus then thrown off a cliff.”

“Oh.”

Amazon laughed. “For me I guess it was a combination of all three, Roxo being Roxo.”

Sage gulped. “What if… it’s not any of those three? What if he likes you and there’s something there, in you, but you don’t know what it is because you can’t see it and it’s beyond your control and you don’t know what to do and – ”

“Sage,” said Amazon, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Relax.”

Sage breathed.

“You’re freaking out,” he said. “Whatever you’re feeling, it’s nothing as crazy as you think it is.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I know you know,” Amazon replied. “Just speak to Scarlet. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“He could say no.”

“You said he loves you.”

“But… That’s just what I see.”

“Have you ever been wrong?” Amazon asked.

A pause, and Sage sighed. “No…”

Amazon smiled. “It’s okay.”

Sage nodded. Yes – he could do this.

***

Scarlet was avoiding his responsibilities, playing a game on his scroll. He was lazing across his bed, relaxed, and Sage thought that was rather unfair. Here he was, panicking inside, and Scarlet was poking balloons with a cat on a screen. Sage watched him from across the room. Scarlet was looking much better, the shadows under his eyes almost gone. He’d returned to vocalising his disgust whenever Sun and Neptune got overly affectionate with one another in public, and he, Yang and Nora had even gone out drinking last night, albeit with Qrow to watch over them. At least, Sage hoped Qrow had stayed sober enough to watch over them.

“Scarlet?”

Scarlet looked up. “Yes?”

Sage gathered his courage, squeezing his fist. “Do you like me?”

“No, I hate you,” Scarlet deadpanned.
“Oh.”
Okay, Sage hadn’t been expecting that.
Scarlet snorted. “Of course I like you, you idiot. What’s all this about?”
Sage scratched the back of his neck. “No, I mean… do you like me the way Sun likes Neptune?”
Scarlet’s eyes widened. He opened his mouth, then closed it. He put his scroll down and stood up.
“Um…” said Sage.
Scarlet looked down. “You already know the answer,” he whispered.
“I… want to hear you say it.”
Scarlet’s scroll made a cat noise, buzzing.
The redhead swallowed, looking up. “I like you, Sage.”

Sage didn’t feel as if he’d discovered joy for the first time. He didn’t feel as if his friendship had grown into something more, nor did he feel as if he’d been hit by a bus.

He just felt.

Sage blinked. “I like you, too.”
Scarlet leaned in, resting his head against Sage’s chest.
“Good.”
Sage put his arm around him, humming.
Sun slammed open the door. “Scarlet, I – ”
The faunus stopped.
Sage froze.
Scarlet raised his eyebrow.
Neptune poked his head in, then groaned.
Sun smirked. “Remember what we bet on for this happening?” He wriggled his eyebrows.
The faunus yelped as he was drenched head to toe in water.

***

Ruby tossed and turned in her sleep. Faces stumbled through her nightmare, masks and hooks and glowing blue eyes. A scream, a pain in her shoulder, and – an arrow, thudding into his chest. Again
and again, she lived those moments. They wouldn’t let her go, dragging her back down to those dark depths, howling at her –

A split second.

Ruby gasped awake.

Her eyes were wide and she shook wretchedly, but everyone else was asleep. She had to tell them, she had to let them know –

She couldn’t move. Her body wouldn’t let her, trembling too much, shivering. Ruby had tackled Merrow, had crashed into him as fast as she could, knocking him into the wall. In that rush – that split second – Merrow’s hood had opened, his mask lifting.

A face – one she didn’t recognise, that wasn’t of his twin. Eyes a pale, mindless blue – a slave.

She hugged her knees, afraid to cry, to do anything, for that could only mean one thing:

Merrow was alive.

Chapter End Notes

So what did you guys think? (If anyone’s interested, I drew what I think Merrow would look like here.) Anyway, I apologise for any mistakes or typos, and as always would love to hear your feedback! What do you think of the story? The writing? The general direction it’s heading in? Stuff?
Scarlet sat with his head in his arms, hiding. Nora and Yang sat next to him, frowning.

“Why are we in a pub at 10 am again?” Yang asked.

“Because,” said Scarlet.

“That’s not an answer.”

“Because reasons.”

Nora scratched her head. “Isn’t it too early to be drinking?”

None of them had anything alcoholic, anyhow. Well, except for Qrow, whom was still watching over them from across the bar.

“As you get older you’ll realise it’s never too early to drink,” the huntsman called, downing his beer and ordering another.

Yang shuffled. “Ignore him. I think he has a drinking problem.”

Scarlet raised his eyebrow. “You think?”

Yang shook her head. “Seriously, though, why are we here?” she said. “You’re acting… suspicious.”

Scarlet swallowed. “Suspicious how?”

“You haven’t told anyone to fuck off yet,” said Nora.

“Fuck off,” said Scarlet.

Qrow laughed, then hiccupped, then slumped over his table.

The door to the pub slammed open, startling them. Their weapons were half drawn until they realised it was just Sage, exasperated and out of breath. Scarlet felt as if he was going to spontaneously combust. He banged his head on the table.

“Scarlet,” Sage cried. “Here you are! I’ve been looking for you since you disappeared this morning.”

Scarlet looked down sheepishly. “I…”

The girls glanced at each other.

“So that’s why you’re acting so weird,” Yang said, smirking.

“No,” said Scarlet.

“Yes,” said Sage.

Scarlet raised his eyebrow.
“Oh!” Sage realised, blushing. “No, not that.”

“Aw,” said Nora. “Shame.”

Sage continued to stutter, completely out of his depth. Scarlet rolled his eyes, grabbing Sage’s hand and pulling him to sit down next to him.

“Are you boyfriends now?” Nora asked.

Scarlet blinked. “I think so. Are we?”

Sage shuffled. “Yes. I mean, if you’d like.”

“Of course I’d like. We’ve been through this already.”

“Okay then.”

“Okay.”

“Right.”

They stared at each other, Scarlet deadpan and Sage’s cheeks flaming.

Yang grinned. “So does that mean your entire team is gay?”

“You’re one to talk,” Scarlet muttered.

They laughed, but Sage was still a little tense.

“Scarlet?” he asked.

“Yes?”

“Why did you leave without saying anything this morning?”

Scarlet hesitated. “I… I was embarrassed, and kind of freaking out that this was actually happening and…” He swallowed. “Wait, why do I have to tell you any of this? You can read my emotions!”

A pause. “Oh yeah.”

Scarlet frowned. “Did you forget your semblance for a moment?”

“Um…”

“Sage Ayana, are you telling me that for the first time in Dust knows how long, you forgot you can see people’s auras?”

“I was preoccupied, okay?” Sage squawked, hiding his face.

Scarlet smirked. “Suddenly, I feel very powerful.”

“Oh my Dust.” Yang sighed. “You two are almost as bad as Sun and Neptune.”

“Hold on, let’s not go that far,” Scarlet said.

Nora shook her head. “Honestly, I’m surprised,” she said. “Sage is way too innocent for you, Scarlet.”
“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m sure Sage will find out,” said Yang.

Sage frowned. “Are they talking about that messed up video game you made me play?”

“No, Sage,” said Scarlet. “Just no.”

Ruby didn’t know what to do. Blake had gone to the library before she’d woken up, Yang was out and Weiss would not shut up about how her sister Winter was coming all the way to Beacon. That being said, Ruby knew Winter was in for one hell of a conversation concerning everything about her former team, but that was something the Schnees would have to sort out between themselves. Uncle Qrow was probably passed out somewhere, and her Dad had gone back to Signal yesterday. Ruby should speak to one of the teachers, Roxo or Amazon or –

Her scroll pinged: a reminder.

Ruby cursed. She’d forgotten she had to stop by the infirmary so Mac Lir could remove the last of her bandages. Wait – Mac Lir! Excellent; Ruby could kill two birds with one stone. As Merrow’s twin, the doctor would know what to do. She swallowed, her throat suddenly dry.

Merrow.

Since he’d faked his death, they hadn’t heard anything from him. He was biding his time, lurking like a shark in the abyss, and Ruby wasn’t panicking. She was not. She had to be sensible about this, she had to be calm.

Ruby walked to the infirmary at a brisk pace, not stopping along the way. She knocked on the door and was called in, finding Mac Lir typing at his desktop.

“Ah, Miss Rose,” said the doctor. “I was wondering if you’d forget.”

She smiled. “I set a reminder.” Her smile quickly dropped.

“Come, sit down,” he said. “Your shoulder should have almost healed, so this won’t take long.”

She sat on the bed, swinging her legs. Ruby took off her cloak and exposed her shoulder, the clean bandaging almost invisible against her skin. She gripped the bed tightly, her knuckles going white.

“Is there any pain?” Mac Lir asked, putting on his glasses.

“Nope.” She shook her head.

“Can you move your arm in a circle?”

Ruby did so.

“Perfect.”

The doctor started to undress her wound. His hands were cold but gentle, yet they made Ruby shiver. She swallowed.

“Mac Lir?”
“Hm?”

Ruby paused, breathing in deeply. She clenched her eyes shut. “What if Merrow’s still alive?”

Mac Lir stopped suddenly.

“That’s not funny, Miss Rose,” he said, his voice quiet. Mac Lir finished undressing her shoulder, and Ruby pulled her shirt and cape back on.

“I know.” Ruby looked down. “I… When I tackled him, I saw his face.”

Mac Lir’s eyes narrowed. “It was a slave?”

She nodded.

The doctor sighed, clenching his fist. “Are you sure?”

“I’m positive.”

He leaned against the wall, shaking his head. “This is not good. I… I should have known he’d do something like this.”

“When you were younger…” Ruby hesitated. “I mean, how long was it before you found out he was evil?”

Mac Lir flinched. “Merrow’s not evil.”

“But he killed people!”

“That may be, but perhaps my brother never wanted to be a murderer.”

Ruby frowned.

The doctor turned away. “Merrow was always a quiet child. He was a terrible introvert, and didn’t really know how to interact with others. Not to mention…” Mac Lir moved the collar of his lab coat, exposing his gills.

Ruby gasped. “You’re faunus.”

Mac Lir stretched. “The first person Merrow killed was out of fear,” he said. “It was an accident, really, but the others didn’t understand.” Mac Lir swallowed. “People found out, and there was a terrible argument. Words were thrown around that should never have been said.”

She shuffled. “How did he escape?” Ruby asked.

“With his intellect,” said the doctor. “He tried to fix things, but… Eventually, Merrow realised that no matter what he did, the world had already decided that it hated him.”

Ruby’s eyes narrowed.

“Merrow fled to Mistral, where the authorities said he killed three more people,” Mac Lir continued. “They lied – those people committed suicide, all after he had left them alone.” He turned to look at her. “That woman that fell to her death here – that was your uncle’s semblance, not Merrow’s.”

Ruby stilled her breath, glancing around the room. There was only one door.
“Everyone else was killed by huntsmen and huntresses,” Mac Lir said, biting his lip. “Do you understand? It wasn’t me.”

She tensed.

The doctor ran his fingers along the desk. “I didn’t want it to be like this,” he said. “I didn’t want you to find out. It was already over; nothing else had to happen.”

Ruby froze, her blood turning to ice.

“What?”

“I don’t exist,” said Mac Lir. His eyes softened. “You see, Miss Rose… Merrow never had a twin.”

She was shaking uncontrollably, could hardly form words. “Y-You’re him.”

The doctor nodded. “I am.”

*Oh my Dust!* She had no weapon, she had no way of contacting anyone – her scroll! Ever so slowly, Ruby reached into her pocket…

“Miss Rose,” he said.

Her body wouldn’t move, only this time it wasn’t out of fear.

Silence.

Merrow smiled. “Now, I’m afraid you’re going to have to put up a fight.”

Chapter End Notes

MERRY CHRISTMAS EVERYBODY!

I’m *so sorry* for taking so long to update! We’ve been moving house and I have a bunch of excuses, but I’ll just apologise instead. >.< Please forgive me! Anyway, I had
hoped I'd have time to write something Christmas-y, but unfortunately that didn't happen, so here you go. I hope you enjoy this chapter - I've been waiting so long to write it! xD Don't worry, the end is in sight! (Maybe.)

As always, thank you so much for reading this far. It really means a lot to me. :)

Their pens scratched the paper, their dorm room otherwise silent. Merrow worked quickly and quietly, his answers brisk, to the point and all of them correct. Amazon took more care to check over his work, cursing softly each time he made a mistake.

“What did you get for 3e?” Amazon asked, biting the end of his pencil.

“4.4 volts,” Merrow said without looking up.

“Thanks.”

“No problem.”

Merrow enjoyed studying with Amazon. He felt as if they bonded more in mutual silence than they did when talking, and Merrow valued that. It seemed the sort of things teammates should do. Unfortunately, their peace was soon disturbed when Roxo slammed the door open, followed by a furious Winter. Amazon rolled his eyes, expecting something trivial, but then frowned.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

Roxo slammed her fist down on the table. “You’re a faunus.”

Merrow started. “What?”

She curled her lip. “You know exactly what I said.”

He swallowed, suddenly nauseous, and Merrow pulled his scarf tightly around his neck.

Amazon got to his feet. “Hey, now…”

Roxo glared at him. “You knew?”

Amazon froze. “I…”

She turned back to Merrow.

“How could you?” Roxo hissed. She grabbed Merrow by his collar, her fist trembling. “How dare you lie to us?”

His scarf slipped; his gills were in plain sight – exposed.

Merrow blanched. “Roxo, I didn’t…”

Winter snorted, tossing her hair. “I should have expected nothing less from an animal.”

“Don’t speak to him like that!” Amazon yelled, stepping in between them and him. “Merrow hid the fact he’s a faunus – so what? Have you considered that perhaps it’s because of people like you that he felt he had to lie?”

“We’re a team,” said Roxo. “Our teammates should be closer than family to us, and that relies
upon a foundation of trust.” She glanced sideways at Merrow. “If he lied to us about this, then how much more is there that we weren’t told?”

Merrow clenched his fist. “I’m sorry you wish you knew everything about me, but you see, trust builds over time. You cannot expect me to give it to you straight away.”

“All of you, stop,” said Amazon. “Please, let’s be calm about this…”

“You expect me to be calm about this?” Roxo laughed, a hollow sound. “My brother’s dead, and in his place we get a filthy liar.”

Amazon flinched.

“Is that all I am – a replacement?” Merrow’s eyes narrowed. “I now see you never had any intention of trusting me. No matter how much I try, I can never compete with a ghost.”

“That’s not true!” Roxo cried.

“It is,” said Merrow. “I’ve seen inside your head, remember?”

Her eyes widened and her nostrils flared. “You – ”

“You’ve gone too far,” said Winter, drawing her rapier.

Merrow extended his hook. “You went there first.”

His voice was low but his heart was racing, because he didn’t want to do this. Merrow didn’t want to fight; he didn’t want to trade insults and blows with his teammates –

“Everyone stop!” Amazon shouted.

Silence.

“We all have our ghosts,” said Amazon, his voice wavering. “We all make mistakes and we all have our failures, but we’ll get through them – as a team.”

Winter sighed, sheathing her weapon. “I… may have said some things that weren’t appropriate.”

Merrow scratched his head. “Me too.”

Roxo fell back onto her bed. “I’m sorry for bringing up my brother. I… I know it isn’t fair on you.”

He hesitated. “It’s okay. I know how hard it is for you all.”

A pause.

“So, you’re a fish faunus?”

Merrow nodded.

Roxo sat up. “Can you breathe underwater?”

****
There was blood in the room. It was splashed across the bed and the far wall, stained, and the door handle was slick with it. It was the only red in a room of white and blue, stark under the harsh lighting. The chairs were broken and the bed was on its side, one of its wheels sticking out at an odd angle and spinning uselessly. Scalpels and medical utensils were scattered across the floor and several lines were gouged out of the walls, books and paperwork shredded all over the place.

Mac Lir was being treated in the corner, one arm broken and a stab wound in his side. It wasn’t lethal, but the doctor had been unconscious when he’d been found, locked inside a cupboard.

Sage knew what had happened.

They all did; Weiss had been the one that found the doctor, that had heard him whisper the words “Merrow took Ruby”. She’d ran to them first in a panic that soon spread, Sun and Neptune having to hold Yang back from chasing after her sister there and then. They’d found all the adults outside, meeting Winter as she arrived. Ozpin had closed the school immediately, sending all the students back to their dorms except Sage.

He now stood, accompanied by Amazon, Roxo, Winter, Ironwood and the headmaster himself.

“The person you shot was a puppet,” Ironwood said, his voice heavy.

Amazon shook his head in disbelief, clenching his fist so that his nails dug into his skin. “How? He… They moved just like him.”

“Merrow had this all planned out for a long time,” Ozpin said. “I hate to admit it, but there was just no way of knowing.”

“I should have known.” Sage swallowed. “That’s why I’m here, isn’t it? I saw that person’s aura, and it was as empty as the other mind slaves.” He grit his teeth. “I should have known…”

Ironwood placed a hand on Sage’s shoulder. “You couldn’t have done better.”

“If anything, we should have known what he was from the very beginning,” said Winter. Her eyes narrowed. “To think that my sister’s team would be hurt by his evil, as well…”

Ozpin sighed. “If there was any other way, I would not ask this of you, but… Sage, you are the only one whom can see people’s auras,” the headmaster said. “To avoid a repeat of this situation, may I ask that you go with the huntsmen and huntresses to save Miss Rose?”

Again. All over again, and just after he’d finally realised his feelings for Scarlet…

Sage breathed in deeply. “Of course I will.”

Just then, Taiyang came running down the corridor, frantic. He doubled over, panting and sweating.

“Is it true?” he cried, his voice strained. “My Ruby – is it true?”

Ozpin closed his eyes. “I’m afraid so.”

Tai screamed, punching the floor as tears fell down his face. “Why?”

It was at this moment that Mac Lir came over, his arm in a sling. “I’m sorry,” he said, his voice breaking. “Tai, I tried to stop him, I – I couldn’t… It’s my fault…”

“No.” Ruby’s father stood up, wiping his eyes. “You’ve done more than enough for my daughters already. Without you, I don’t know what would have happened to Yang,” he said. “All I ask is that
when we rescue Ruby… that you…”

Mac Lir smiled. “I’ll be right there, waiting on standby.”

Sage blinked, then shook his head. It was strange – for the briefest moment, he could have sworn he’d seen a flicker of scarlet in the doctor’s aura…

Chapter End Notes

So, what did you think?
Merrow sat before Ozpin, meeting his gaze unflinchingly. Goodwitch stood behind him, her arms folded, and a police officer was next to her, a faunus. Merrow wasn’t stupid; he knew what this was about. He didn’t worry, though. It wouldn’t take long. Winter wanted to squeeze in some extra training before the Vytal Festival, and Merrow couldn’t let his team down.

“I’ll get straight to the point,” the headmaster said. “Did you kill Chairo?”

“No,” Merrow said. “I did not.”

The policeman growled and Goodwitch breathed in.

Ozpin sighed. “She loved you, you know.”

Merrow blinked. “What?”

“Chairo had a diary.” Ozpin pulled a small, brown book from his pocket, an item as fragile-looking as the girl herself had been. “She called you her ‘mystery’, and often wrote about you.”

Merrow snorted. “That’s ridiculous. We hardly knew each other.”

The headmaster flipped a couple of pages. “Apparently, you defended her when she was being bullied.”

“I did?”

“She was touched. Your kindness affected her greatly.”

“Headmaster, I knew nothing of this,” Merrow said. “Please don’t tell me some childish infatuation is grounds for suspicion in what was clearly a suicide.”

Ozpin snapped the diary shut. “Chairo wrote in her diary every single day up until the Monday before her death.”

Merrow waved his hand. “Something must have affected her.”

“Indeed.” Ozpin studied him. “Her teammates told us that for the four days leading up to her death, Chairo spoke… differently.”

Merrow raised his eyebrow.

“Funnily enough, her classwork suddenly became exceptional,” he continued. “What’s more, the last essay she wrote had exactly the same argument as yours.”

“I helped her with it,” Merrow replied.

“No, you didn’t,” said Goodwitch. “We’ve accounted for all of her actions in that timeframe, and you didn’t meet with her once.”

“I – ”
“We also know you had no electronic contact with her whatsoever.”

Merrow flinched. “So what?”

“You’re not an idiot, Merrow,” the headmaster said, “so don’t treat us as such.”

Merrow laughed, strained. “Do you really think I killed her?”

Ozpin leaned forwards, meeting his gaze. “Yes.”

Merrow shook his head. “Why would I do that?”

“You tell me.”

Ozpin stood up, and the policeman produced a pair of handcuffs.

“You’re arresting me?” Merrow started.

“Yes.”

“No, you can’t do that!”

Goodwitch stepped forwards. “Actually, we can.”

This… This couldn’t be happening. Everything was going perfectly; his world couldn’t come crashing down now. It just wasn’t possible. There was a way to avoid his arrest, but Merrow knew that would only complicate further situations. However – that was a risk he was willing to take.

Merrow tensed, but Ozpin put both hands on his cane. “I wouldn’t try anything if I were you.”

The faunus grinned. “Then isn’t it a good thing that I’m not?”

Goodwitch straightened, brandishing her riding crop, but all of a sudden she lashed out at Ozpin. The headmaster blocked with his cane but Goodwitch backed him into a corner as the policeman drew his gun, also pointing it at Ozpin.

Ozpin grit his teeth. “What have you done, Merrow?”

“I thought ahead,” Merrow said. “Although it seems as if my semblance doesn’t affect you for some reason.”

Ozpin yelled something in reply, but Merrow was out of the room before he could hear it –

“Merrow.”

Merrow skid to a halt in surprise. “Amazon!”

Amazon swallowed. “Where are you going?”

He glanced behind him, making the policeman lock the door. Ozpin didn’t want to do anything to hurt Merrow’s puppets, so they were at a standoff for now.

“Out,” Merrow said. “I have some work to do.”

“I’ll come with you,” Amazon said. “That’s okay, isn’t it?”

“No, I’m fine,” he said quickly, shuffling around. “It… might take a while.”
“But why?” Amazon whispered. He clenched his fists, trembling. “Why, Merrow?”

He hesitated. “I don’t – ”

“It’s not true,” Amazon cried, grabbing him by the shoulders. “Tell me it’s not true, Merrow! You didn’t kill her. You didn’t!”

Merrow panicked, his entire world shaking. “I…”

“Enough, Amazon,” said Winter. She and Roxo emerged from round the corner, their weapons drawn. “It’s all true, what Ozpin said. He killed Chairo.”

Merrow swallowed. “Come on, guys. We’re teammates. You can’t honestly believe that?”

Amazon let go. “I… I don’t know what to believe.”

“I didn’t kill her,” he said.

“Merrow…” Winter growled.

“I didn’t kill her,” he yelled. “That bitch killed herself! You all saw it!”

“Yes.” Roxo snapped her fans open. “But only Amazon saw the colour of her eyes when she jumped.”

Merrow took a step backwards. “Amazon, you…”

Amazon closed his eyes, looking away. “I didn’t want to believe it, but… When Ozpin spoke to me…”

“You betrayed me,” Merrow hissed.

A pause. “You killed her.”

It all happened at once.

Winter stabbed at him but Merrow dodged, pulling Amazon in front of him and pushing him into Winter. They cried out but Roxo whistled, the windows smashing behind them. Merrow ducked, covering his face from the glass, and Roxo kicked him, sending him sprawling down the corridor. He gasped at the force of her blow, coughing blood.

Roxo – wasn’t holding back. His teammates had turned on him, his friends –

His friends hated him.

Before Winter could use her glyphs Merrow pulled his coat around him and jumped out of the window, rolling as he landed. He didn’t dare risk looking back; he just ran, leaving everything else behind him.

***

Coco Adel heard the sound of muffled conversation and peered out of her dorm room, glancing into
the corridor. She watched as team JNPR and what was left of team RWBY crept down the hall, Jaune hissing for Yang and Nora to be quiet. She watched them turn the corner then snuck behind them, just in time to see them disappear into team SSSN’s room.

Huh.

Coco felt Fox walk up behind her.

He placed a hand on her shoulder. “What are you doing?”

Coco bit her lip. “Looking after my juniors.”

***

Neptune glanced out of the window. Professor Port strolled down below, pacing as casually as he could with a battle-axe across his shoulders. There were more teachers surrounding their dorms, although Neptune suspected that they were there to keep certain students in rather than Merrow out. The students in question were all gathered in team SSSN’s dorm, something which made it very difficult to move about. Sun had attempted to hang from the light to make more space, but Neptune had promptly vetoed that idea, leading to what was now a face full of Sun’s tail.

Yang punched the wall. Neptune winced.

“I just can’t believe we’re under house arrest!” she growled.

“After what some of us pulled last time, it’s only logical,” said Pyrrha.

Jaune scratched the back of his head.

“There has to be something we can do,” Weiss said, shaking her head. “Ruby… could be…”

Blake placed an arm over her comfortably.

“There’s one thing that’s bothering me,” said Neptune, his eyes narrowing. Sun shuffled out of his way. “Yang and Nora, when you were with Merrow… What was he doing? And what did he make you do?”

Nora breathed in deeply. “We just… stayed with him.” She glanced at Yang, confused. “What did happen?”

Yang frowned. “We followed him around like bodyguards. I think.”

“What was he doing?” Neptune asked.

“He was speaking to people, making sure the Dust workshops were functioning properly.”

“Was that all?” Blake said.

“We saw people fighting each other with Dust,” said Nora. “It looked as if they were testing it out.”

“That’s standard practice in the industry,” Weiss sniffed. “It’s a way of quality control.”

“Then – why did he kidnap you two?” Neptune asked. “What purpose did it serve?”

Silence.
Yang swallowed. “We… didn’t really do anything.”

“Perhaps he didn’t have time to do what he wanted?” Sun suggested.

Neptune shook his head. “Merrow’s too clever for that.”

“But then what else?” said Ren.

Jaune hesitated. “What if…” He looked up. “What if the only reason you two were kidnapped was to be rescued?”

Blake frowned. “What?”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” said Sun. “No one gained anything from it.”

“Your rescuers did, one in particular,” said Jaune. “Mac Lir saved your lives – everyone trusts him now.”

They started.

“You mean the doctor’s working with Merrow?” Nora exclaimed.

Jaune nodded.

“There is another possibility,” said Neptune. “Remember how identical twins either share a semblance or one of them has nothing?”

Pyrrha clenched her fist. “Then Mac Lir could have mind control as well.”

Weiss stood up. “We have to tell someone about this.”

“Tell whom?” asked Scarlet. “No one will listen to us.”

“Someone has to!” she cried. “We can’t be the only ones who’ve figured this out.”

“The thing is, the adults won’t want to believe Mac Lir betrayed them,” Ren said. “The doctor’s the only one that can heal Merrow’s victims.”

“Not to mention they’ll just think we’re trying to escape,” said Blake.

“Then what do we do?” Nora asked.

“Did you forget?” Sun grinned. “We have a nerd on our side.”

Neptune frowned. “Sun…”

“Can you get us out of here?” Yang asked.

Neptune hesitated. “I can, but then what? If Merrow gets a hold of me…”

“Then we make sure he doesn’t,” said Jaune. “We can get into formation around you, with Nora, Yang and Scarlet out front. Merrow can’t control someone twice, remember?”

“But what about Mac Lir?” Scarlet asked.

“We’ll manage,” Jaune said. He glanced around. “Is everyone up for it?”
They nodded.

Neptune coughed. “Let’s head to the roof, then.”

Blake opened the door and yelped as she walked straight into Coco, the second-year and the rest of her team pressed up right against the doorway.

“You know,” said their senior, “if you’re all going to gather in the same room, you might as well try to do it less conspicuously.”

“Coco!” Yang cried. “How… How much did you hear?”

She grinned. “All of it.

“Oh.”

Velvet poked her head in. “Your plan won’t work,” the faunus said. “Goodwitch is guarding the roof.”

Someone swore.

Coco flicked her hair. “Fear not. We’ll distract her for you.”

“But… why would you do that?” Nora asked.

“Because we want Ruby safe as much as you do,” said Yatsuhashi.

“Bring her back to us, okay?” said Velvet.

Sun nodded, his eyes narrow. “Will do.”

Coco smiled. “Wait for our signal.”

“What’s your signal?”

She shrugged. “You’ll see.”

Team CFVY left, and Blake sighed. “This had better work.”

“Of course it will.” Yang rolled her eyes. “You know Coco.”

After several anxious minutes passed, they heard someone scream. Everybody rushed to the window, where they saw a frantic Velvet run up to Port, sobbing something about Merrow. Whether it was Velvet’s semblance or her innate acting ability, it worked. Glynda hopped down from the rooftop, using her telekinesis to land, and the teachers immediately gathered, Velvet keeping them distracted.

“Now’s our chance,” said Sun.

They ran to the rooftop, the sky clear. A clear breeze rippled through them, and they crouched down low so as not to be seen.

“What now?” Pyrrha asked.

“Everyone, stick close to me,” Neptune said.

They all huddled together and Neptune closed his eyes, breathing in. He extended his semblance,
reaching out to the water vapour in the air and condensing it. Droplets formed, merging into swirling strands of water that spun into a sphere, enveloping them. Gulping, he froze the bottom so they had a place to stand and lifted the sphere upwards through the air, as quickly as he dared.

People shouted as they were noticed. Goodwitch yelled something, firing purple energy at them. Neptune braced for the impact but Weiss reflected them with her glyphs, Pyrrha using her semblance to create a ruckus on the ground. Soon they were up in the clouds, out of reach, and the temperature dropped. Sun shivered.

“You sure you can keep carrying all of us?” Scarlet asked.

“For a while,” Neptune said, sweating. “But…”

Scarlet raised his eyebrow.

“Um…” He swallowed. “Where are we actually going?”

***

They stood up as Winter strode into the room, several soldiers accompanying her.

“We’ve located them,” she said, tossing her hair.

“Already?” Sage frowned.

“Yes.” Winter’s eyes narrowed. “No matter how clever Merrow may be, he’s no match for the intelligence of two governments combined.”

Sage resisted the urge to point out that if this were true, then Merrow wouldn’t still be a threat. He didn’t question it, though – any lead was good news.

“Where are they?” Amazon asked.

“An abandoned dock by the edge of Forever Fall.”

Sage started. “That’s where the White Fang were holding Neptune’s father.”

Roxo shook her head. “We’d better hurry.”

Winter nodded. “Agreed.”

Chapter End Notes

*says he’ll update more regularly* *doesn’t* Whoops... Anyway, here it is! :)

He forced his legs to move, wading through the snow. It was bitterly cold yet he didn’t feel it, his body adapted to both the temperatures and the pressures of an underwater life. His scars were stinging terribly and Merrow grit his teeth, but he continued on, ignoring the pain on his forearms. Before, he had tied his fins down to his skin, disguising them with long sleeves and gauntlets. Now, he had cut them off in a fit of rage, consumed by hatred. If it wasn’t for his cursed, faunus body, none of this would have happened. He wouldn’t have had to hide, to lie or to kill. Merrow had caught himself before he’d mutilated the fins on his ankles as well, and hadn’t gone anywhere near his gills – he wasn’t prepared to kill himself, not yet.

How did he end up here, in the frozen wastes of Atlas?

Merrow wasn’t entirely sure. He didn’t remember running away, only the expressions of horror and disgust on his teammates faces. Yes, he’d made a mistake, but he’d tried to fix it, he really had. No one had listened to him, though. Amazon, Roxo, Winter… They’d already decided that he was a monster, and…

Maybe he was.

Merrow was a monster that could breathe underwater and survive in sub-zero temperatures. He was a filthy murderer, and he deserved to be hated, but…

He didn’t want to be.

His tears had run dry long ago, but his heart still bled with a crippling loneliness, as it always had. Merrow wanted a team. Merrow ached for friendship, for family, but – that was beyond him now.

The moon was full, its light making the snow glow. Ice dripped from pine trees, their needles glittering jade, and a mournful wind stirred through the tundra. A blizzard would soon come, and Merrow knew that even with a body such as his, he would need to find shelter. According to his memory, there should be a town coming up soon, a small one without any huntsmen or huntresses in it. He could find refuge there, perhaps not even needing to use his semblance to do so.

A scream.

Merrow’s head turned sharply. It was close, close enough to be a problem. He crept silently through the trees, sticking to the shadows, and –

A girl had fallen in the snow, shivering in fear. A pack of white beowolfs surrounded her, growling as they bared their teeth. Merrow clenched his fist. There were twelve Grimm that he could see, enough to cause trouble. He had never seen a white Grimm in person before, but Merrow knew that they were rumoured to be more powerful than regular Grimm, and that was not a rumour he was eager to test.

Merrow took a step backwards, holding his breath, but the girl noticed him, making eye contact – and so did the Grimm.

Merrow swore.
The first beowolf pounced. Merrow punched it under the jaw, knocking it backwards, then rushed it, drawing his blade. A stab to the stomach and a hook upwards was all it took, the monster turning to ash.

The rest of them attacked but Merrow was ready for them. He slashed and pulled, gutting and disembowelling a further two of them. He kicked another and then beheaded it, slicing out with his blade.

Merrow got lost in the adrenaline, roaring with a feral bloodlust. He laughed as the Grimm clawed at him, the sight of his red blood staining the snow spurring him on. One of the creatures bit into his shoulder and he cried out, but it was a glorious pain and he punched its skull, again and again until his faunus strength crushed the Grimm underneath him.

Merrow couldn’t move one of his left arm, and his blade fell from his grip. Blood splattered onto the metal as Merrow’s vision swam and he coughed red, stumbling. Everything was numb, everything swimming, but –

There was one beowolf left.

It howled, the alpha of the pack. Merrow drew his dagger and grinned, licking his lips. Before the Grimm could charge Merrow tackled it, plunging his arm down its throat and stabbing up into its brain. The creature turned to ash as it closed its jaws, and Merrow collapsed.

He lay in crimson snow, his life trickling from him, and the rage fled from him. All that was left was an overwhelming emptiness, his very soul hollow, and Merrow began to cry. His tears froze almost instantly, searing his skin, but Merrow couldn’t move.

He heard the girl’s voice, felt her hands on him, trying to stop the bleeding, but it wasn’t working. She cried out for help, speaking to him, but Merrow closed his eyes, giving in to the waiting darkness. Funnily enough, it was his team that drifted through his mind as he died, and Merrow smiled. Yes – in the end, they were the only ones that had the right to kill him.

***

Merrow woke up.

If he was dead then this was definitely hell, because heaven could not hurt so much. His entire body burned, and his throat was painfully dry. He appeared to be lying down, the ceiling above him wood, yet Merrow couldn’t move his neck.

“Careful, now,” said a voice. An elderly face ducked into view, a man with silver hair and small, wired spectacles.

“Wh... Who are you?” Merrow croaked.

“I’m a doctor,” said the man, shaking his head. “Don’t try to speak, it won’t do you well.”

The man disappeared, then reappeared with a bottle of water. He moved Merrow into a sitting position and held the bottle up to Merrow’s lips. Merrow drank gratefully, gulping it down.

“My granddaughter was the one you rescued from the Grimm,” the doctor said, sitting down next to Merrow. “She was the one that brought you to me. Just in the nick of time, too, I might add.”

Just then he heard the clatter of feet as someone else entered the room, and the girl shoved her head right up to his.
“Is he awake?” she asked.

Merrow blinked.

“Of course he’s awake, Holly,” the doctor replied.

“Is he going to be okay?”

The man snorted. “He will be if you give him some space.”

Holly breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s good.”

She was young, younger than him – about fifteen or sixteen, if he had to guess.

“Grandpa uses Dust to heal people,” the girl said, beaming at him. “You’ll be better in no time, trust me!”

“Oh.”

The doctor shook his head. “It’s the least I could do.”

Holly hesitated. “What were you doing out in the forest?”

Merrow said nothing.

She hesitated. “Was it because you’re a faunus?”

“Holly!” the doctor cried.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” the girl protested. “I just know about what they go through…”

Merrow swallowed. “I… No, it wasn’t.”

“Oh, right.”

The man shook his head. “What happened to your arm fins?” he asked. “The scars hadn’t healed properly, and were beginning to get infected…”

Merrow stayed silent, suddenly guilty to say that he had done that to himself.

The doctor noticed this, and scratched his head. “Sorry I asked. I didn’t mean to intrude.”

Merrow started as Holly squeezed his hand, holding it tightly. She bowed her head.

“Thank you for saving me,” she whispered. Her voice trembled slightly, and it carried emotions that Merrow had never experienced before.

“You’re welcome,” he said quietly.

Holly smiled, her eyes bright, and Merrow felt something stir within him. In that moment, her eyes reminded him of Amazon’s, and – Merrow suddenly knew what he had to do. It would be difficult, and it might not even work at all, but it was the best chance he had. To get his team back, Merrow had to rescue them from a monster, but – what monster? They could fight Grimm themselves…

Merrow blinked as it dawned on him. A monster already existed – him. He would become someone else, and save his friends from Merrow. Merrow would have to act as a true beast, then, but that was simple. All monsters wore masks, after all. Merrow’s blade rested in the corner of the room,
cleaned, but he could still see the remains of dried blood in its grooves.

“By the way, what’s your name?” the doctor asked. “We couldn’t find anything on you to identify you by.”

He paused for a moment. “Mac Lir,” he said. “My name is Manannán mac Lir.”

Chapter End Notes

So this chapter is all about an OC... Sorry. :/ I was planning on having more, but this part ended up being longer than I'd anticipated, so here we are. I also added in some details to make Merrow's faunus traits more compliant with the canon. What did you think?
They watched the flickering scene, the image grainy. Sage was crammed in between Amazon and Taiyang, all of them squeezed into a police vehicle parked by the edge of the woods.

“There’s nobody else around,” said Ironwood, studying the feed. “Only Merrow and Miss Rose.”

Winter’s eyes narrowed. “He’s trying to escape.”

“Hold on, fly round to the ocean side,” said Roxo.

The drone did so, the image changing.

“See?” she said. “There aren’t any boats.”

“There’s enough debris left over from the White Fang for Merrow to build something, though,” said Winter, tapping the screen.

“Are there any paladins still left there that we missed?” Roxo asked.

“It’s a possibility,” said Ironwood. “I’ll have my soldiers take care of them.”

Taiyang frowned. “I thought we agreed your soldiers would keep the Grimm at bay.”

“But –”

“There’s no need, Ironwood,” Amazon interrupted. “Merrow didn’t have time to build up an army of slaves, which means that he’s desperate. Once we secure Ruby, we won’t have to hold back any more.”

The general sighed.

“Do you think you can do it?” said Ironwood.

Winter snorted. “Of course we can.”

“And what of Merrow?”

“I’ll deal with him,” said Tai, clenching his fist. A quick glance at his aura, and Sage knew Ruby’s father wouldn’t take any other option. Apparently, so did the others.

“Qrow, you go with him,” said Ironwood. “Winter and Roxo can take care of Miss Rose, and Amazon and I shall provide support.”

“What about me?” asked Sage.

“You’ll stay by my side until we’ve confirmed Merrow’s down,” said Amazon.

Sage flinched. “You mean until he’s dead?”

A pause. “Yes.”
Roxo glanced at her husband, and Winter shook her head.

“It’s the only way, kid,” said Qrow, his eyes hardening.

Sage swallowed.

***

They watched from the cover of the forest, Amazon’s fingers hovering by his bowstring. Nothing moved except for the two huntresses stepping into the middle of the docks, a lonely wind stirring the ashes the White Fang had left behind. Broken paladin exoskeletons lay around the place, blackened with soot, and malaise hung thick in the air. This was not a place to dwell in – the fear and hatred it once harboured had soured with abandonment, and Ironwood’s soldiers were keeping a sharp lookout for any Grimm that neared.

Something boomed – a heavy footstep.

Winter drew her rapier, and Roxo snapped her fans open. Both of them stood in perfect stances, Winter’s hair billowing in the wind. Out from behind one of the buildings a paladin stalked, its guns swivelling towards them. In the cockpit – Ruby.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” said the girl, too far away for Sage to make out her expression.

Roxo shook her head. “We know.”

It happened all at once.

Gunfire cut through the air but the huntresses darted to either side, Amazon shooting the paladin down. His arrows bounced off its armour, but they confused Ruby, the cockpit swivelling round as she tried to pinpoint his location.

Ruby locked on to them, but Roxo attacked. Boom after sonic boom crashed out as the huntress flicked her fans, hitting the paladin square on. It lost its balance, falling until it grabbed onto a building to steady itself.

Amazon and Roxo continued to barrage Ruby, giving Winter time to prepare. The Schnee stabbed the ground, a glyph enveloping her. Bit by bit a blindingly white shape rose from it, burning with an ethereal light. It rose with no sound, but when it was fully formed – Sage gasped.

Winter had summoned another paladin.

Ruby’s paladin attacked, but Amazon shot its elbow joint. Winter’s summoning leapt forwards, tackling the paladin to the ground. It wouldn’t hold for long, but –

Roxo jumped up onto the paladin, cracking the cockpit open with her fans. Ruby cried out but the huntress grabbed her, darting out of the way on a wave of sound. Ruby kicked and screamed but Roxo knocked her out, just as the sticks she’d left in the cockpit exploded.

Sage covered his eyes, blinking as the fire died away. Smoke poured into the sky, a twisting beacon, and their coms buzzed as Winter confirmed Ruby was secure. Winter’s summoning disappeared, and all was still again.

***

Qrow and Tai crept silently, their breathing marked. Behind them they heard the sound of fighting,
and Tai clenched his fist, locking his jaw. Qrow noticed this.

“Easy, there,” he said.

Tai snorted. “I don’t need you telling me that.”

They slipped round the buildings towards the edge of the dock, corrugated metal sheets providing them cover.

**Knock.**

They froze, meeting each other’s eyes. The noise had come from up ahead, the sound of metal hitting metal.

**Knock.**

The huntsmen drew their weapons, Tai summoning his flames. Forwards they went until a shadow appeared from round the corner, its arm raised to strike something.

**Knock.**

Tai swallowed. Merrow was hammering something. They nodded to each other, signalling, and –

**Knock.**

The huntsmen charged, but there was nothing there. A sheet of metal had been rivetted over the door to a warehouse, several other planks hammered onto it. There was a hammer on the floor, and several parts lay scattered around, wires bared. They were next to the ocean but they could see nothing on it, nor underneath it. Merrow wasn’t –

Qrow blocked Merrow’s first strike yet the force of the blow pushed him backwards. Tai cried out, rushing in, but Merrow broke away, dancing out of range.

“Tell me now, what’s a pair of professional huntsmen doing chasing a ghost?” he teased.

Tai’s eyes hardened. “I’ve always wanted to find out if ghosts can burn.”

Merrow attacked but Qrow deflected. Tai darted in, punching Merrow square in the chin, then roundhoused him and kneed his face before he could recover.

Merrow stumbled backwards, dizzy, but when Qrow slashed at him Merrow caught his scythe on his hook, twisting his arm and forcing Qrow to let go of his weapon. Merrow leapt at Qrow but tripped over Qrow’s scythe. Tai punched him again, throwing fire, and Merrow cried out, scrambling to put it out.

Tai snapped his fingers and the flames erupted again, though, heat rolling. Merrow roared, ripping at his clothes, yet his still wouldn’t take off his mask.

“Careful there,” said Qrow, picking up his weapon. “You want to leave the face recognisable.”

Tai was about to reply, but – Merrow was still moving. In a desperate burst of speed he flew at Tai. Tai ducked but was too slow, Merrow’s blade slicing over his shoulder. However, Qrow swung his scythe, and –

Merrow was now in two.
Tai collapsed, breathing heavily.

Qrow raised his eyebrow. “You alright?”

He nodded, too exhausted from using his semblance to speak. His shoulder was buzzing in pain, but they’d killed him… Had they?

Qrow lifted the mask, tossing it into the sea. He breathed in deeply, exhaling as he wiped his brow, and then grinned.

“It’s him.”

Tai blinked back tears, covering his eyes. *Yang, Ruby…* He coughed. *We’ve done it.*

Qrow walked over and he got to his feet, swaying slightly.

“What’s all that about?” Tai asked, nodding to the boarded up warehouse.

Qrow’s eyes narrowed. “Why don’t we find out?”

All it took was a couple of strikes from Qrow’s scythe and the boards fell away with a clang, raising clouds of dust. It was dark inside, almost too dark, and they could see nothing. Then – a flash of red, and another, until dozens of eyes were locked on them, flickers of bone-white glistening among the shadows.

Tai swore even as the Grimm pounced.

***

Neptune collapsed almost as soon as they landed, Sun catching him as he fell. His face was red, sweat beading across his forehead.

“Neptune!” Pyrrha cried.

“I’m fine,” he panted. “You guys go ahead, hurry.”

Pyrrha drew her sword. “But the Grimm in the forest…”

Scarlet clenched his fist. “Sun and I will look after him,” he said. “Go save Ruby.”

Weiss swallowed. “But…”

“We’ll stay with you,” said Ren, Nora nodding in agreement.

Jaune started. “Wait –”

“There’s no time to argue,” said Nora. “Just go, now!”

They hesitated no longer, Yang nodding. “Thanks.”

The others left, and Scarlet scratched his head, glancing through the trees.

“How many Grimm do you reckon there are around here?” he asked.

Neptune winced. “The search and destroy field trips have all been cancelled recently. Add that to the White Fang’s activity…” He trailed off, swallowing.
Ren unsheathed his pistols. “I’ll use my semblance to –”

Nora pushed him out of the way as the beowolf attacked, rolling and hitting it with her hammer. Scarlet darted forwards, stabbing it with his cutlass until it fell. He backed towards the others, his eyes darting around him –

“Ah, fuck,” said Sun.

They were surrounded.

***

Someone swore through their coms.

Amazon frowned. “Was that Qrow?”

Sage shrugged.

“Taiyang, we’ve secured Ruby,” said Winter into her com, the huntresses coming over. “Ironwood, get Mac Lir here as soon as possible.”

“Hold on,” said Ironwood. “One of my men’s spotted something.”

Roxo snorted. “Sage, can’t you –”

“Fucking hell, you idiot, run!”

A pause, and Sage started to sweat.

“That was definitely Qrow,” said Amazon.

Winter’s eyes narrowed. “Do you think they managed to get him?”

No one answered her question.

First they heard the yelling, and then came Tai and Qrow dashing round the corner, waving madly. Sage barely had time to frown before a tide of black shapes surged after them, and he just –

Roxo yelled something a teacher really shouldn’t say, just as the gunfire started.

“Ironwood!” Amazon shouted, shooting as fast as he could. “What the hell are you doing?”

“What the hell are you doing?” the general shouted back, making Sage clutch his ear. “The Grimm just started attacking out of nowhere.”

“Qrow,” Winter growled.

“It wasn’t me!” Qrow yelled back, swinging his scythe at a pack of ursa as they ran to help.

“Merrow had them locked up,” breathed Tai, gasping. “He just… shoved a whole bunch of Grimm in a warehouse, and… Qrow cut down the blasted door.”

“You never tried to stop me!”

“How was I supposed to know that –”

“Oh my Dust, shut up!” Winter cried. She shot red dust at a King Tajiti, her attacks hurtling a hair’s
breadth past Qrow and Tai’s faces.

The huntress danced with her rapiers, glyphs hurling her through the air. Roxo kept whistling and exploding Grimm, and Amazon mowed them down with his arrows. Tai looked a little worse for wear, his shoulder bleeding, but Qrow covered him, the Grimm never even getting close.

“Where’s Ruby?” Tai asked, his voice strained.

“With Amazon,” said Roxo. “She’s safe, for now.”

He sighed. “Thank goodness.”

They fought against a backdrop of gunfire, bursts of dust lighting up the forest. With a cry Sage joined the fray, swinging his sword. He felled three Grimm in a single strike then stopped, confused.

Sage scratched his head. “Why are they so weak?”

Roxo kicked one. “The students from Beacon usually clear these woods out, so powerful Grimm stay away from here,” she said.

She swished her fans and a boarbatusk fell apart, just as Qrow beheaded an ursa. After only a couple of minutes, there were significantly fewer Grimm, and the gunfire from the forest had all but stopped.

A nevermore tried to take flight but Winter froze it to the ground, running up onto its back and impaling it through the neck. It burst into ash and Winter flipped out of the way, tossing her hair as she landed. Footsteps came running.

“You guys doing okay?” Ironwood cried, rushing up to them with Mac Lir by his side. The doctor looked flustered and out of breath, straightening out his lab coat.

“Small fry like these are no match for trained huntsmen,” Roxo grinned. “It was a piece of – ”

The huntress jerked, her mouth falling open.

Amazon screamed.

Roxo looked down to where a long, thin spike of bone poked through her hip, blood quickly welling. It splattered to the floor and Sage could only stare in shock, frozen by such violent emotions.

Before anyone knew what was happening, Winter stabbed the ground and a wall of ice rose to shield them, several more spikes thudding into it. There – across the dock – a manticore. The Grimm was about the size of an ursa but it had a vicious red mane, fangs dripping with poison and a tail bursting with quills, each the size of his arm. Where had it come from? It –

Mac Lir pushed Sage aside as he rushed to Roxo’s side, his eyes wide.

“Oh Dust,” he said, his face frantic. “This wasn’t supposed to happen…”

“Roxo, stay with me,” Amazon said, clenching her hand. His whole body was shaking. “It’s going to be okay.” He grabbed Mac Lir by the shoulder. “She’s going to be okay, right?”
The doctor brought out some dust crystals from his pocket, crumbling them into the wound. “This should stop the poison spreading, but…” He swallowed. “It’s cut her spine. I don’t…”

Amazon bit his lip, his eyes clouding over. He grabbed a single arrow, clutching it like a knife, and with a roar broke from cover, charging straight at the manticore.

“Hey, wait!” Qrow cried, running after him. He blocked the manticore’s spikes and Ironwood shot at it, Winter chasing them.

Winter jumped on a staircase of glyphs, rising into the air. No words needed to be spoken. Amazon stopped all of a sudden, Qrow covering him, and Amazon’s semblance flared, Winter engulfed by green. She poised and her glyph burned from black to emerald, almost doubling in size. Ironwood closed one eye, steadying his breathing, and shot the manticore right in the eye. It howled, rearing, and –

Empowered by Amazon, Sage didn’t even see Winter move.

One moment she was in the air, and then the manticore was torn in half. The shockwave crashed over them, Winter’s impact so forceful it cracked the asphalt, leaving a steaming crater behind.

Amazon collapsed, trembling. Qrow helped him to his feet while Winter kept her guard up, scanning the area for any more Grimm. Ironwood’s soldiers rushed in and the wall of ice melted, everyone regrouping. Sage just stood there, paralysed by all that had happened.

Tai swallowed. “You okay, Sage?”

“I…”

Roxo couldn’t be. She just couldn’t…

“I’m going to pull out the spike,” said Mac Lir, gritting his teeth. “I need someone to keep the pressure on her wound.”

“I’ll do it,” said Sage, shaking himself out of his stupor. He knelt down, forcing his hands to steady as he pressed into Roxo’s side.

“No, higher,” said Mac Lir, placing Sage’s hands where they needed to be. Both of their hands were slick with the huntress’ blood, and Roxo was barely holding on to consciousness. Everyone’s auras were going crazy, yet Mac Lir’s was steeped in guilt, enough for Sage to take note…

Locking his jaw, the doctor removed the spike in a swift motion, Sage applying pressure. More dust was crumbled into the wound and a soldier brought over bandages, Mac Lir wiping away some of the blood before wrapping her up.

“I can operate on her in the truck,” said Mac Lir, wiping his brow. “Bring Ruby, too.”

“How… how bad is it?” Amazon asked.

“I – ”

Roxo tried to speak. “I… I can’t…”

“Ruby!” yelled a voice.

They all turned to the edge of the docks, where Yang had pushed her way past the soldiers, Blake, Weiss, Pyrrha and Jaune in tow.
Ironwood blinked. “What the –”

“Is Ruby safe?” Yang cried, rushing to her father’s side. “Is she –”

The students started when they saw all the blood, and Weiss gasped.

“Mrs Azulado!” she whispered. “Oh my Dust…”

“Weiss, what are you doing here!?” Winter cried. “You –”

“Get away from him,” said Jaune, drawing his sword.

Ironwood clenched his fists, towering over the students. “You all had better put your weapons down, right now.”

Pyrrha walked straight past him, extending her sword into a spear. She levelled it at the doctor and Sage started, standing up.

“What the hell are you doing?” Amazon cried. “Can’t you see Roxo’s… been…”

“It’s him,” Pyrrha hissed, her eyes cold. “Can’t any of you see? It’s him!”

Winter started to say something but Sage took a step backwards, holding out an arm. He swallowed, his throat going dry, because…

“Ironwood, I need to treat them immediately,” said Mac Lir, the doctor seemingly ignoring Pyrrha’s blade.

The general hesitated. “Mac Lir, you…”

The doctor clenched his fist, anger flaring in his aura. That wasn’t what had startled Sage, though – it was the scarlet. Mac Lir… Mac Lir was enjoying this.

“What happened to Merrow?” Sage asked, his voice hoarse.

“I killed him,” said Tai. “Qrow confirmed it.”

Ruby’s uncle nodded.

Weiss shook her head. “But what if it’s not –”

“How do you know?” asked Jaune.

“I saw his face,” said Qrow.

“Did Sage see his aura?”

The huntsman hesitated.

Mac Lir frowned. “Didn’t anyone hear me? None of this matters now; I need to treat Roxo and Ruby.”

“He’s right,” said Tai. “Please, Yang, save all of this for later. Your sister…”

“How do we know for certain that Mac Lir can’t control minds, too?” Yang spat.

Tai started, and Winter’s eyes narrowed.
Ironwood glanced at the doctor. “Well?”

Mac Lir took a step backwards. “This is ridiculous!” he said. “What reason would I have to lie?”

Sage shook his head.

“What reason would I have to lie?” he asked. “You’re overjoyed…”

The doctor frowned. “I’m just glad this is all over, like everyone else here.”

“Not –”

Ruby groaned. Her eyes fluttered open and she sat up, coughing.

“Why are you so happy?”

Her aura was weak, and by her head there was a flickering patch of colourlessness…

Sage gripped his sword with both hands, tensing. “She’s still possessed.”

Mac Lir looked down, clenching his fists.

“It’s not me.”

Ruby’s eyes narrowed. “Then where’s Merrow?”

Sage glanced behind him as Ruby rubbed her eyes. “My head hurts,” she said.

“It’s alright, Ruby,” Tai said, trying to shush her.

“My head…”

For a moment Sage could have sworn that Ruby’s eyes flashed silver. A single tear fell down her cheek and she pulled at her hair, hyperventilating.

“There’s someone else in my head,” she cried, clenching her eyes shut.

Mac Lir took another step backwards. “What’s she doing?”

“It’s okay, Ruby,” Taiyang hurried. “Please, hang on in there!”

“It…” Ruby started, scrambling backwards as she stared at the doctor in horror. “I remember.”

Mac Lir frowned, pulling his coat tight around him. He pushed his glasses up his nose, tilting them, and that invisible colour flared in Ruby’s aura. A sudden burst of silver pushed it back, however, and Mac Lir and Ruby both flinched.

“How –”

“It’s you!” Ruby whispered, gritting her teeth as she pointed. “You did something to my memories, you tried to…” Her eyes widened. “You’re Merrow.”

Silence.

Everyone drew their weapons, the soldiers pointing their guns at Mac Lir, and tension dripped through the air. Pyrrha’s grip on her spear tightened, her knuckles going white as she locked her jaw.
The doctor snorted, glaring at Ruby. “You’re crazy.”

Yang’s eyes flared red. “Then I’m crazy, too.”

Yang and Pyrrha charged just as Winter yelled at them to stand down. The doctor dodged Pyrrha’s stab and blocked Yang, leaping out of the way and towards the sea.

“Get the girls out of the way!” Ironwood shouted. “We can’t hit him otherwise!”

Blake, Jaune, Sage and Weiss ran forwards before any of the adults could stop them. Yang’s teammates grabbed her, holding her back, and Jaune and Sage tried to get Pyrrha out of the way of the soldiers’ lines of sight but –

Merrow grinned, and Sage charged.

Jaune jumped in front of Pyrrha, blocking Sage’s swing with his shield.

“What the hell!?” he cried, but then his eyes widened.

Sage –

Sage was trapped inside his own body.

He couldn’t move, couldn’t scream. All he could feel was the doctor’s skin brushing against his as he’d treated Roxo – physical contact. It was as if Merrow had pushed Sage out of his own body and Sage was clawing to get back inside, struggling desperately, but –

Merrow was too strong.

Merrow’s mind was completely separated from his emotions, and Sage had nothing to work with, nothing to fight with. He was beyond helpless.

Sage jumped in front of Merrow, his human shield. Everyone was screaming his name yet Sage couldn’t say anything, couldn’t cry out for help –

Someone else brushed his mind.

“Sage!” Amazon yelled, meeting his eyes as light coursed through the huntsman’s tattoos. Sage felt power burst into him, felt Amazon’s strength flaring inside of him.

Sage pushed back against Merrow, briefly wrestling back control. He roared, dropping his sword and wheeling around –

Merrow wouldn’t let him go.
Sage cried out as pain wracked his body, his muscles spasming as Merrow’s semblance beat him down.

No.

No, he couldn’t go like this. He couldn’t lose, not when Scarlet was waiting for him to come home!

Sage reached out with the last of his strength, one final struggle –

He grabbed Merrow’s wrist.

Merrow tried to get away, tugging, but Sage’s grip was relentless. Amazon’s semblance fuelled his own and Sage dug into Merrow’s aura. They stood, frozen in time, their battleground unseen. Merrow attacked his memories but Sage attacked Merrow’s emotions, hooking in to them. Their minds crashed into each other, their auras colliding.

You can’t beat me, said Merrow. I’m stronger than you.

Sage grit his teeth as his nose started to bleed. Merrow dragged memories through his head, dissecting everything Sage had ever known.

You’re just a child.

Sage’s family screamed as they burst into flames, his house, his village, burning before him…

Your life has been easy. You have never known true pain.

It was Sage’s first day at school, only this time he had fins and gills and people were throwing rocks at him, hatred in their eyes…

You’re a fool.

Sun and Neptune danced through his mind, completely ignoring him.

You think your friendships will last?

Sage coughed blood, his vision swimming. Scarlet was in front of him and Sage cried out, but Scarlet turned his back, walked away.

Merrow snorted. You think your love will last?

 Darkness crumbled in from the corners of his vision, his knees buckling out from underneath him. He felt Amazon’s semblance still there, fighting alongside him, but it was not enough…

“Sage!” Sun screamed.

Sage’s eyes widened. His team…
“Hang in there,” cried Neptune. “We’re all here for you; you can’t lose!”

Sage grit his teeth, standing back up. Merrow faltered, but even then Sage still couldn’t –

“What are you waiting for?” said Scarlet.

Sage started. His teammates were right there with him; Scarlet, was right there…

Of course it was Scarlet that said it:

“Just fucking punch him.”

Sage hit Merrow square in the stomach, then punched across his face, knocking the glasses off him. He let go of Merrow but then tackled him to the ground, grabbing hold of Merrow’s face. Merrow struggled, tried to hit him, but Sage finally understood. The reason behind everything…

_Scarlet looked down uncomfortably, avoiding his gaze. “Am… am I… lonely?”_

Sage latched onto Merrow’s fear, latched onto his isolation and inflated it. All those years of people shunning Merrow had left deep scars, and Sage ripped all of them to the surface.

Merrow screamed, shrieking, and then –

Sage let go.

He stood up and Merrow scrambled away, terrified. He had lost all composure, his face betraying everything, and Sage wiped the blood from his mouth.

“It’s over.”

Merrow dived into the sea before Sage could grab him. Neptune reached out and a bubble of water broke the surface, Merrow frantically trying to burst it. He panicked, lashing out, but it was useless. He was a fish caught in a net.

Neptune dropped him down and the bubble broke, Merrow coughing seawater from his lungs and out of his gills. He huddled against the ground, shivering, and – it was Amazon that approached him. The huntsman drew his bow, the arrow pointing straight at Merrow’s head, and rage flared in his eyes.

Neptune started but Sun held him back with his tail, and Sage clenched his fist. Roxo tried to speak but she was too weak, Winter holding her, and Merrow looked up, meeting Amazon’s gaze.

Nothing moved.
Amazon’s arm started to tremble but then he lowered his bow, sighing.

“Merrow Ceiren,” he said, his voice heavy. “You’re under arrest.”

Chapter End Notes

*says he’ll update more regularly* *doesn't* Whoops...

I feel as if I spent way too long writing this chapter. I really hope it’s a satisfying climax, and was worth the wait! If you spot any typos, please let me know, and thanks for reading this far! Only two more chapters to go~
There was but a sheet of glass in between them, invisible. No hood, no mask – nothing. Hair the colour of pale, twisting smoke; eyes the colour of rainwater. Merrow wore a sleeveless prison gown, plain white, and his hands were cuffed in thick, metal gloves that would not come off. Scars covered his arms, white ridges that ran all across his body, and two deep scratches ran along his forearms. When asked what happened to his fins, Merrow had revealed that he had cut them off himself, and Amazon wasn’t sure how to feel about that.

Merrow had been compliant after his arrest. He kept his head down but didn’t avoid eye contact, yet… He was bare. Amazon could see it now, the way loneliness clung to him like a shroud, his gills a mark of stigma. Sage had stripped something from Merrow, peeled away one of his layers, and Amazon felt as if he understood the faunus a bit more – although that still wasn’t enough.

Winter stood smartly beside him, her posture straight. Her face was unreadable, her lips pressed into a thin line. Amazon’s hands refused to let go of the rails of Roxo’s wheelchair, even though his wife was perfectly capable of turning the wheels herself. Paralysed from the waist down, the huntress had lost a lot more than her mobility that day, although she continued to move forwards with a grim determination. At least, that’s what everyone else said, but Amazon was the only person whom had seen her tears fall on clenched fists.

Merrow looked at all three of them, his expression rivalling Winter’s.

“Well?” said Roxo. “Aren’t you going to speak?”

Merrow blinked. “I couldn’t think of what to say.”

Roxo snorted, and Amazon’s eyes narrowed.

“No words can earn you forgiveness,” Winter said.

He sighed. “If it’s forgiveness I wanted, we wouldn’t be here.”

Silence.

“What are you going to do now?” Amazon asked.

Merrow grinned. “Break out of here with my incredible intellect.”

“There’s no way you can do that,” Winter growled.

“I know.” Merrow’s smile dropped. “I was trying to be funny.”

“Why?” asked Roxo. “Why keep trying, after all this time?”

A pause. “To be honest, I’m not sure,” he replied. “All I know is that you three are illogically important to me.”

Winter flinched. “Stay away from me, my sister or any of her friends.”

Merrow looked down. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean for anyone to get hurt.”
Roxo bit her lip. “You must have known people would have.”

“But I didn’t mean it.”

“That’s not how things work, Merrow,” said Amazon.

A sad smile. “I suppose.”

Merrow traced one of the scars on his arm absent-mindedly.

“Why did you do it?” Winter asked. “Your fins.”

“Anger and self-loathing,” he said. Merrow met her gaze. “Guess why.”

Winter swallowed.

Roxo’s eyes narrowed. “You did that to yourself.”

He ignored her. “Why come here?” Merrow asked, shaking his head. “Why interrogate me when you already know everything I’ve done?”

A pause.

“Because we were your teammates,” said Amazon.

“Yes.” Merrow closed his eyes. “You were.”

Ironwood buzzed them – their time was up. Four guards entered the room from Merrow’s side, grabbing the prisoner, and the hunters turned to leave.

“Roxo,” Merrow called out.

“Yes?”

Amazon turned her wheelchair around to face him.

“In the north of Atlas there’s a town called Krei,” Merrow said. “There’s a girl there named Holly, a healer. Her grandfather was the one that taught me medicine.”

Roxo frowned. “And? Do you have a message for her?”

He shook his head. “Tell her I sent you, though. She’ll be able to heal you.”

Roxo’s eyes widened, and she leaned forwards in her chair. “Seriously?”

Merrow nodded.

The huntress smiled a little, the first time in days. “Thank you.”

Whether Merrow responded or not, the audio feed was cut off, and Merrow was lead out of the interrogation room. The door closed shut behind him, and – he was gone.

***

Weiss sat beside Ruby’s bed, watching the girl sleep. Yang and Blake had been there earlier but they’d left, Weiss the only one staying. The doctors had already treated Ruby, or at least, they’d done what they could. Mac Lir – or rather – Merrow had planned to alter Ruby’s memories while he
treated her, fiddling with her brain so that she wouldn’t remember that Mac Lir didn’t exist. Merrow had told Ironwood that Ruby would be fine, and Weiss could only hope.

She reached out to brush Ruby’s hair out of her face, naively hoping that her touch would somehow wake the girl up. Ruby’s eyes remained closed.

Sighing, Weiss left, tracking down her sister. Ever since Winter had arrived Weiss hadn’t had a chance to speak with her properly, and she had a hell of a lot of things to say. As it so happened, Winter was looking for Weiss, and they bumped into each other by the gates to Beacon.

“Winter,” said Weiss, standing up straight and brushing her hair.

Winter breathed in deeply. “Weiss.”

A pause as neither of them knew what to say.

“How’s Ruby?” Winter asked.

Weiss wrung her hands. “I’m not really sure.”

Winter’s brow creased with concern. “I’m sorry.”

She shook her head. “It’s not your fault.”

“It is, though,” Winter said. “I… I became the leader. I’m the one that should have stopped Merrow, before he started killing.”

“Winter, you – ”

She grit her teeth. “I should have been stronger.”

“You are strong, Winter!” Weiss cried. “You’re the strongest person I know, but…” Weiss trailed off. “Why didn’t you tell me when Mrs Azulado’s brother died?”

“It’s not just you I didn’t tell.” Winter hesitated. “With the way father is… If he knew one of my teammates had died, he would have used it as an excuse to call me home. Besides, you were only fourteen at the time.”

Weiss looked at her sister. “You could have told me,” she said quietly.

“I…” Winter shook her head. “Do you understand now why I made you train so hard before coming to Beacon? You have to be strong enough to protect both yourself and your teammates.”

Weiss looked away. “Respectfully, I disagree. Your team is there to cover your weaknesses and become your strength; you don’t have to be stronger than everyone else.”

Winter’s eyes narrowed. “Look what happened to your team.”

Weiss’ nostrils flared. “Excuse me?”

“Sorry, that was out of line.” Winter placed a hand on Weiss’ shoulder. “I’m glad your safe,” she said. “Everyone else, too.”

Weiss closed her eyes. “Yes.”

“Weiss!”
Weiss tensed as she saw Blake running up to them, but nothing was wrong.

“Ruby’s awake,” said the faunus.

Weiss swallowed. “Is she…?”

Blake smiled. “She’s fine.”

Her heart raced, Weiss glanced at her sister.

Winter patted her on the back. “Go to your leader.”

***

Sage followed Scarlet gingerly, blushing every time they passed someone even though there was no reason to. Scarlet walked ahead of him, his pace determined and his arms almost swinging. Perhaps Sage was blushing because that was what Scarlet was doing on the inside, although Scarlet apparently possessed the superhuman ability to mask his feelings. That didn’t bother Sage, because Scarlet couldn’t hide from him, but then neither could Sage hide from Scarlet. Sage wasn’t good at hiding things in general, but Scarlet made his body rebel against his brain, and he had to clench his fist to stop himself from reaching out and interlocking his fingers with Scarlet’s.

But – they were boyfriends.

It was okay for Sage to hold hands with him, right? Scarlet wouldn’t mind, would he? It was a normal boyfriend thing; Sun and Neptune did it all the time. Sage suddenly remembered what else Sun and Neptune did all the time and he squeaked, his face flaming.

Scarlet raised an eyebrow. “You okay, there?”

“Yes,” he said quickly.

Scarlet frowned.

Sage started to sweat.

Sighing, Scarlet grabbed Sage’s hand and pulled him along, shaking his head.

“That wasn’t so hard, now, was it?” the redhead said.

Sage wriggled his fingers and was suddenly very conscious of how sweaty his palms were. “Um… How did you know?”

Scarlet grinned. “Because I’m a genius.”

No one they passed batted an eye, for which Sage was grateful. They were still in Beacon, of course, Scarlet leading them towards the forest.

“Where are we going?” Sage asked, looking around. They’d missed the turning for the green house, so he had no idea what Scarlet had in mind.

“You’ll see,” was the reply.

They walked through the trees, Scarlet so eager that Sage nearly tripped over roots a couple of times. Dappled sunlight bathed the forest, stained green from the canopy of leaves, and birds sang to each other, their voices carried by the breeze. This close to Beacon, the forest was free from Grimm, so
the fauna thrived. Insects buzzed around the place and animals scuttled through the undergrowth, everything thrumming with life. Eventually they reached a small stream, and Scarlet stopped by a large plant that overhung the water.

Small, emerald leaves glittered in the sunlight, and feathery white flowers fluttered in the wind. As they watched, a family of ducks emerged from beneath its branches, bobbing further down the stream.

“I found this place a while ago,” said Scarlet. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Sage nodded.

“It…” Scarlet scratched his head bashfully. “It reminded me of you, actually.”

“Um…” Sage swallowed. “Thanks?”

Scarlet looked up, frowning.

“This plant, err…” Sage didn’t really want to say this. “It’s… It’s knotweed.”

Scarlet’s eyes widened, and he took a step back. “Are you kidding me?”

Sage shook his head. “It’s an invasive species, so…”

Scarlet turned around, exasperated. “I try to do something romantic, and it turns out to be a bloody weed!”

Sage laughed hugging Scarlet from behind. “Thank you,” he said. “The gesture was appreciated.”

Scarlet pouted. “It’s a weed, though.”

“Glad to know that’s what you think of me.”

“Sage!”

Scarlet was smiling, though, and they stayed like that for a while.

“Sage?” he asked, his voice quiet.

“Yes?”

Scarlet pressed into him. “Thanks.”

A frown. “For what?”

“For coming back to me.”

Sage pressed his face into Scarlet’s hair, tightening their embrace. “No problem.”

***

There was a knock on the door.

Rhea Vasilias opened it, poking her head out. Sun’s mother stood outside, Sun’s sister with her.

“Oh, hello,” said Rhea. “Can I help you?”
“Um…” Yaya shuffled.

“Yaya had something she wanted to ask you,” said Huang, nudging her daughter.

“You do?” Rhea bent down, smiling. “Ask away.”

“Y-You… You’ve organised parties before, haven’t you?” Yaya asked.

“Why yes, I have.”

“Well…” Yaya took a deep breath. “It’s my birthday in two days, but… I was thinking maybe I could throw a party for Sun, Neptune and all their friends instead, to cheer them up.” She swallowed. “I… Would you be able to help me, please?”

Rhea blinked in surprise, then grinned. “Now that’s an excellent idea if I ever heard one.”

Chapter End Notes

So the next chapter will be the last one! *cries* It might take a bit longer for me to write, as I definitely don't want to rush it, but I promise it will come! >.<
Sage was woken up by someone trying to be quiet, but decided to ignore them.

“Hey, Sage is still asleep!”

Huh, so Sun’s brothers were over. Yaya’s party was later that day, but he didn’t have to get up yet. Dust knows, a lie in would do him good after all that time Ironwood and Goodwitch spent yelling at them yesterday. Sage got the feeling Goodwitch would have expelled them then and there, if it weren’t for Ozpin stepping in.

“We should steal his clothes,” said Mara.

“We should draw on his face!” said Cuja.

“Draw on his face,” Sun replied. “He won’t mind if you steal his clothes.”

Sage stayed completely still as he felt the twins climb onto his bed. It didn’t matter; the pen would wash off.

“Hey, what are you two doing – ”

“Shh!” hissed one of the twins, accidentally poking him with the pen.

“No no, you can’t just draw a smiley face,” Scarlet said. “If you’re going to graffiti, do it properly. Draw a dick.”

Sage’s eyebrow twitched.

He heard Sun snort. “What are you teaching my brothers, Scar?”

Neptune placed something down on the floor. “You guys are so immature.”

“Nerd.”

“Idiot.”

“Stupid Sun,” the twins chorused.

Scarlet snickered.

“Oh, look.” One of the twins hopped off. “It’s that little tree.”

The other one followed. “I wonder if I can fit it in my mouth…”

“Okay, that’s it!” Sage shot out of bed, grabbing the twins by the tail and lifting them up. “No one tries to eat my bonsai, got it?”

Mara and Cuja tried to look sorry, but they glanced at each other and burst into laughter. Sage dropped them on Sun, glaring at Scarlet.

“What did you do?”
Scarlet shrugged. “Nothing.”

Sage frowned.

Neptune gestured to his face. “You might want to…”

Sage looked in the mirror to see a smiley face on his left cheek, a scribble on his right and a crudely drawn penis on his forehead. He hurriedly washed them off, grateful that the ink wasn’t permanent. Sage almost tripped over the punching bag on his way out of the bathroom, stumbling to right himself.

“Did you steal that from the gym?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“No, I bought it,” Sun huffed indignantly.

“We bought it,” Neptune corrected. “It’s Yaya’s birthday present.”

“Oh.”

Sage had cultivated a bouquet of flowers for Sun’s sister, something which Scarlet had poked fun of him for. When he’d offered to make Scarlet one the redhead had stammered so badly he’d ended up swearing.

“Wanna try it out?” Mara asked, gesturing to the punching bag.

“No,” said both Sage and Neptune.

“Can we try it out?” said Cuja.

Sun rolled his eyes. “Why don’t you fellas go play Mantle with Scarlet?”

Scarlet sat up. “Hold on, what?”

“Yeah!” the twins yelled.

“Scarlet, I’m going to beat you like Sun beats Neptune!” said Cuja.

Scarlet raised his eyebrow at Sun.

“In video games,” the faunus deadpanned. “He means in video games.”

Sage sighed – there was no way he was going to get back to sleep now.

***

Weiss did Ruby’s hair for her, humming as she did so.

“Are you sure you should be going to this party?” asked Blake.

“I’m fine,” Ruby said, shaking her head.

Weiss slapped her. “Don’t move.”

Ruby flinched. “Sorry.”

“Weiss!” Yang said. “Be careful with her.”
“She’s fine,” Weiss snorted.

“She?” said Ruby.

Yang wrought her hands. “But…”

“I know it’s weird, but…” Ruby hesitated. “I don’t think Merrow wanted to hurt me. He was just…”

“Afraid,” said Blake.

“Yeah.”

Yang swallowed. “He was still in your head, controlling you.”

“But… Now that we know everything, it’s like…” Ruby thought for a moment. “He’s not a monster any more, he’s a person.”

Blake’s eyes hardened. “People can be monstrous, too.”

“I know.” Ruby sighed. “I just…

Weiss finished with Ruby’s hair, pinning it in place. “There we go.”


Ruby frowned as Weiss rummaged around in her closet. “What are you looking for?”

“This,” she said, holding up her snowflake pendant.

Ruby’s eyes widened. “Weiss! You said you wouldn’t let me use it again.”

“Yes, well…” Weiss twirled a lock of her hair. “Diamond suits you.”

Silence.

Blake’s mouth fell open. “It’s diamond?”

“Well…” The heiress blinked. “Yes.”

Ruby watched Weiss put the pendant on her wordlessly, her eyes sparkling like the diamonds she now wore. Weiss’ fingers lingered on the back of Ruby’s neck and eventually settled on her shoulders.

“Oh my Dust,” said Yang. “Scarlet was right.”

“Right about what?” Ruby frowned.

Her sister grinned. “You’ll find out one day.”

***

“Weiss!” said Ruby. “We’re going to be late!”

“We’re already late,” said Neptune.
“All thanks to you,” Scarlet snorted.

“Hey!” Neptune cried. “I would have been ready half an hour earlier if someone hadn’t used up all my hair gel.”

Sun glanced at him sideways. “Dude, your hair’s already blue. You don’t need to put gel in it.”

Neptune was about to say something but then stopped, sighing. “I can’t take you seriously like that.”

Sun glared at him. “You’re just jealous of how fashionable I look.”

“Yeah!” said Cuja, waving his fist at Neptune while Mara sat on Sage’s shoulders.

Sun had let his brothers style his hair to keep them entertained. It started off well enough, until Mara discovered the gel – Sun’s head now resembled a frightened hedgehog, but the true crime was that the faunus was unapologetic about the atrocity.

Sage shook his head. “I can’t believe they managed to rent out a hotel for the party,” he said.

“My parents helped,” Neptune replied, cocking his head. “I do wonder what it will be like…”

Even before they entered the hotel, they could see the balloons tied outside.

Scarlet frowned. “How old is your sister, again?”

“Twelve,” said Sun.

They went inside, and Scarlet blinked at the decorations. Sheets of black and white fabric draped across the walls, chairs and tables, tied together with crimson ribbons that rippled rather like blood. In fact, red was the only colour that broke the monochrome, apart from what the guests wore, and the serving staff were all decked in… gi. Each of them wore a karate suit, complete with a black belt which was almost definitely fake. They stood around with drinks on platters shaped like shuriken, and seemed to be enjoying the affair almost as much as those invited.

Scarlet’s mouth hung open.

Sage coughed. “This…”

Sun smiled. “This is my sister, alright.”

“Sun,” Yaya yelled from across the room. “You’re late!”

“Blame the twins,” he yelled back.

Yaya ran to Sun, jumping to hug him. Then her face twisted in horror.

“What happened to your hair?”

“The twins happened,” said Neptune.

Yaya glanced up to where Mara and Cuja were perched on top of Sage. The twins grinned devilishly, and Yaya took a step backwards.

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY!” they cried as they catapulted off Sage, tackling their sister to the ground. Yaya shrieked then laughed, and Sun picked all three of them up.
“Happy birthday, Yaya,” he said.

She beamed.

Sun’s and Neptune’s parents came over.

“You finally made it,” said Jin.

Rhea smirked. “I like the hair, Sun.”

Sun nudged Neptune. “See?”

“You do?” said Mara. “Really?”

“We can do your hair for you, if you want,” said Cuja.

Rhea smiled nervously. “Um…”

Sage and Scarlet took this opportunity to slide out of the conversation, going over to join team JNPR. Jaune was currently slumped in a chair, twitching.

“Dare I ask?” said Scarlet.

“Coco borrowed his guitar,” said Pyrrha.

“She just… took it,” whispered Jaune. “Like that, gone.”

“He’s kind of in shock…” Nora trailed off.

Jaune looked up. “Why would she want my guitar?”

“To play it,” said Pyrrha. “You’re being silly, Jaune, nothing’s going to happen.”

“But…”

“Coco’s responsible, right?” said Ren.

Scarlet snorted.

Just then, Nora spotted something. Her eyes widened. “They have pancakes.”

“Nora, no!” Ren cried, running off after her.

They blinked.

“Ren will… take care of her,” said Pyrrha, sweating.

Team RWBY came over to join them. Their leader wore that diamond pendant again, and Ruby kept glancing at Weiss. Weiss pretended not to notice Ruby glancing and Yang just smirked at the pair.

Scarlet nudged her. “Did something happen?”

Yang shook her head. “Not yet.”

“Huh…”

Pyrrha smiled. “You’re looking well, Ruby.”
Her eyebrow twitched in frustration. “I am well.”

Sage laughed. “It must be annoying having everyone doubt you.”


Her sister shrugged. “Hey, I’m just doing what big sisters do best.”

Scarlet raised his eyebrow. “Drink themselves under the table?”

“Watch it, you.” Yang snorted. “This is a child’s birthday party.”

“It seems rather…” Weiss struggled to phrase herself. “…austere, for a party.”

“Sun’s sister’s into violence,” said Scarlet.

“We noticed,” Blake deadpanned.

Ruby noticed Jaune hugging his knees and poked him until he slapped her fingers away. She frowned. “What happened to him?”

“Coco’s using his guitar,” said Pyrrha.

Blake blinked. “Coco can play the guitar?”

“I don’t know!” cried Jaune, his eyes wide. “What if she just… smashes it? Like a madwoman?”

Ruby grinned. “Metal.”

“It’s not metal, it’s wood,” Jaune sobbed. “My sisters gave that guitar to me…”

Scarlet caught Sage’s eyes, and gestured to Jaune. Sage frowned. Scarlet gestured again, then Sage caught on.

“Relax,” said Sage, patting Jaune on the back. “Everything’s going to be okay. It’s a party; just have fun.”

The blond sighed. “I guess.” He perked up a bit as Sage’s eyes flashed green. Pyrrha mouthed a silent thanks.

Just then the lights dimmed, and spotlights fixed onto the stage across the hall. Coco sat on a stool, looking so ridiculously suave with the guitar in her arms that Jaune just… deflated. Pyrrha rubbed his back, and Scarlet snorted.

Coco played, and Neptune was pleasantly surprised. She strummed well, and when she started singing, the room was entranced. Yaya watched wide-eyed as the adults hummed to themselves, and Sun slipped his hand into Neptune’s, wrapping his tail around his waist absent-mindedly.

“This is nice,” he said.

Neptune squeezed his hand. “Yeah.”

They heard the squeaking of wheels as someone walked up next to them – Amazon and Roxo. Amazon nodded at them, but Roxo just watched Coco sing, her mouth parted. The huntress’ eyes
sparkled, and Neptune smiled.

“Her voice is beautiful,” Roxo whispered.

“It is.”

She traced circled into her legs, sighing.

“Where are the others?” Sun asked.

“Tai and Qrow are over there,” said Amazon. “Winter said she might pop by later, but James and Glynda are still thinking up a suitable punishment for you lot.”

Sun’s smile fell. “Oh.”

Amazon chuckled. “What ever it is, you’ll deserve it.”

The faunus pouted. “I guess…”

Coco finished her song to a roaring of applause, but it wasn’t over yet. The room went dark, and someone screamed. There were a couple of moments of scuffling, then the spotlights blared again, and – all of team CFVY were on the stage, except this time, Coco had an electric guitar. Fox was on bass, Yatsuhashi was on synths and Velvet… Shy, reserved Velvet, was on…

Yatsuhashi brushed his fingers against the keys and a solemn melody bled through the air. It crept through semitones, chilling the atmosphere, until –

All of them came in at once.

“Maybe red’s like roses?” Coco sang, her lips curling. “Maybe it’s the pool of blood the innocent will lay in when in the end you’ve failed to save them?”

Velvet crashed on the drums with an almost terrifying glee and Sun jumped at the sudden wall of sound. Neptune’s parents were taken aback, to say the least, and Sun’s brothers started yelling and banging their heads.

Sun whimpered, rubbing his ears. “How long is this supposed to go on for?”

***

Mercifully, the rock soon gave way to smoother, more danceable music. Cup of CFVY, as they were called, were actually competent across a wide variety of genres.

“See?” Pyrrha was saying. “I told you it’d be fine.”

Jaune mumbled something and they continued dancing, the blond’s face the same shade as Pyrrha’s hair.

Sage and Scarlet also danced, each holding onto the other as they swayed. Sage was pretty sure his brain was supposed to be short-circuiting at the close contact, but it wasn’t. Sure, he had his hands on Scarlet’s hips and Scarlet was pressed up against him, but that was normal, wasn’t it? Sun and Neptune were dancing, too, although they were currently doing a bit more than dancing. Sage saw Sun lead Neptune away from the crowd and he blushed. How could Sun do something so bold during his own sister’s birthday party?

“Is there a reason you’ve been staring at Sun and Neptune make out?” Scarlet asked.
“No!” Sage squeaked.
Scarlet raised his eyebrow.
“I just…” He swallowed. “Don’t know…”
Scarlet blinked.
“…what to do,” Sage finished.
Scarlet frowned. “What do you mean?”
“Is this okay?” Sage hesitated. “Just dancing, I mean. Is this alright?”
Scarlet headbutted Sage’s chin playfully. “Why wouldn’t this be okay?”
“I don’t know.” Sage felt very hot, all of a sudden, his shirt prickling against his skin.
Scarlet smirked. “You know, if you want to kiss me, you should at least take me out on a date.”
Sage squawked. “I don’t – ”

His body said otherwise, and Scarlet knew it. Sage buried Scarlet’s head in the crook of his neck before Scarlet could say anything, hugging him tightly to keep him quiet. Scarlet rumbled with laughter. His aura was bursting with colour and Sage wondered if his was, too. He wondered if both of them were glowing crimson and gold, he wondered if their colours would melt into one another, indistinguishable.

“Scarlet?” he said.

“Yeah?”

“The first kiss is considered a big step in a relationship, right?”
Scarlet scratched his head. “I guess?”
“But, you know, we’ve known each other for a long time.”
“Too long, if you ask me.”
Sage ignored him. “And a relationship’s just like an evolved friendship, right?”
Scarlet met his eyes. “Where are you going with this?”

“Um… Well, we’ve spent so much time together that there are bound to have been dates we didn’t know were dates, right?”
“I suppose.”
Sage had gone bright red. “So it really wouldn’t be a big deal if we… you know…”
Scarlet caught on. “Oh. I – I guess it wouldn’t…”
“I mean, only if you want to – ”
“I do – ”
“I don’t want to pressure you or make you feel awkward or – ”

“Sage,” Scarlet interrupted.

“Yes?”

“Just kiss me.”

Sage did so, and he had been right all along. It wasn’t a big deal – it was a hundred million little deals that all flickered and fluttered in his stomach and Sage couldn’t quite process all that was happening but Scarlet’s lips were against his and their bodies were flush and oh shit, Sage had opened his mouth accidentally and now Scarlet’s tongue was –

They pulled apart from air a couple of moments later, only to find everyone staring at them.

Sage was frozen in place.

Scarlet blinked. Yang winked at him, and Nora started laughing.

Ruby rubbed her eyes. “Since when – ”

Chapter End Notes

*exhales deeply* *pauses* AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAnd it's finished! *•✧meye+D*:°* Yay!!! (*^▽^*) / Oh my gosh, I've been writing this series for over a year, and it's finally done! *whispers* What will I do with my life now?

⊙︿⊙

Thank you all so much for reading all this way! Your comments and kudos are what kept me going~ I hope I managed to do the ending justice!

Again, thanks! (≧▽≦*)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!